THE BOILER

A JOURNAL OF NEW LITERATURE

SPRING 2014

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THE BOILER JOURNAL is a literary journal that publishes four times a year online at www.theboilerjournal.com

THE BOILER accepts submissions online via its submission manager year round. Poetry should be 3–5 poems and prose under 3,500 words. Full guidelines and dates for upcoming issues are available on our website.

Credits.

Book Layout and Design: Sebastian H Paramo
Cover and Art Design: Sebastian H Paramo and Carly Susser
Cover Image: Eleanor Leonne Bennett

THE BOILER JOURNAL is published independently through its editors and generous funding from its supporters.

Distribution. Online

For inquiries email theboilerjournal@gmail.com

THE BOILER

spring 2014

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INSECT

the book is about
insects : on a porch swing
my feet dangle
in the air as I teach
my grandfather everything
about moths and earwigs

and when I get to garden spiders
his hand shoots through the air— clenches—
brings his fist to my
chest— peels back
his fingers— shows me the fire
fly in his palm : carefully

he turns the insect
over—all six legs
grasp the air—delicately
he tears its glowing
abdomen off—sticks it to my index
finger : I fall

asleep in his arms
that night—watching
my new ring grow
dim—both of us
bathed in neon light

PATRICK VENTURELLA

ANTIQUE

age collects
in the corners

of your mouth
when you smile
wrinkles echo

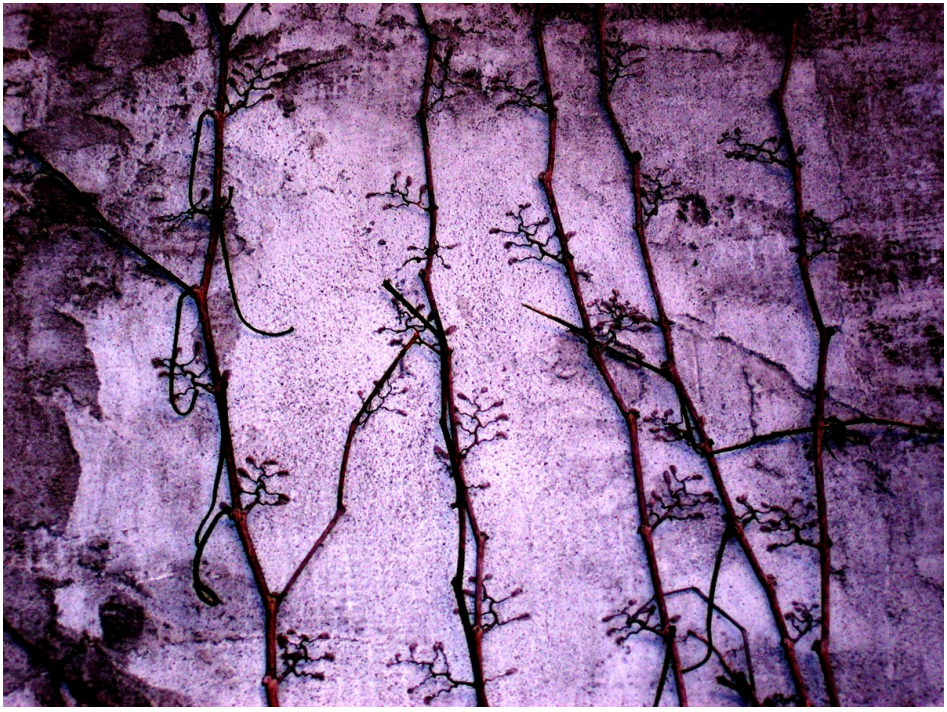
out in parenthesis
that weren't there
when we were seven

and Mrs. Owens
wanted to show

the class how
a heart really
worked so she

quartered a sheep
heart and passed

it around the class
like a meat apple



RANDI WARD | holdfast xxi

SARAH JANCZAK

MY RULE WAS ALWAYS THIS

I must be able to pronounce it.
To slip the language through my lips,

to mean it. And I did. Each night,
I rolled their names over

and over my tongue. I stopped smoking.
I rubbed my belly. Thought, *the time, it is coming.*

I practiced baking birthday cakes,
tying shoes. Goodnight moon.

This month again I stroke
each viscid brown (almost) child

as he slides out of me.
We were going to call you Cuauhtémoc,

I whisper. *An eagle*
who descends on his prey. Here,

in the fluorescent bathroom,
mold covered baseboards,

my fingers are forced to the truth,
it turns inside my uterus:

a balloon full of radon.

SARAH JANCZAK

TIME IS ALSO A MOLECULE

Mercury is in retrograde and astrologers advise
against signing contracts. What do we trust if not beginnings?

I was not on a path that led me here;
I am here and now I see the path. Out there

the bus goes by every 15 minutes, my dog barks
at passing strangers. Strange men who glance inward,

I put your face on every one of them. I keep a hammer
under my pillow. My grandfather taught me precaution.

Grandpa, how do I meet anyone when our lives pass like data
from one invisible account to the next? I do not earn anything.

I am only losing sight of what once was real ––
the way grass feels in the morning, like a soft shower.

EMILY GRACE BERNARD

INSIDE THE FAMILY

We were on vacation when it happened:
My brother and I. Our bodies slightly
Darker from the sun, sunscreen
Rubbed into us
Told your lung collapsed like the leg
Of a dining room table

We will feed each other cheese platters tonight
Our fingers in each other's mouths
My mother used to tilt our heads upwards against the toilet
Dental floss cutting into her hands—

The first time our car broke down, we greased
The engine with Vaseline
My brother and I sitting on the couch, knees
Pressed into one another

My mother got $1,000 for its parts
The scrap metal yard where huge, half-bodies
Of automobiles lay like exotic animals
Taking their last breaths

The mortician must have pried
Her zipper-- cut open her khaki pants
The silence of the body
Speaks volumes

Later we will decide whether to put her ashes
In our dining room or living room. Yellow was her favorite
Color: she had decorated
From things she had seen in catalogues

EMILY GRACE BERNARD

THE LOVE IN PENNSYLVANIA

In October he goes through orchards learning
The flags of the body: redder and wetter into
Fall, into fallen and smashed harvests
Fruit basket stuffed in his mind's eye
This is taking a new woman. Other pastorals
And cartographic exchanges of infirm maps
Written by their Mothers— he dreams of tuning her monthly as
A piano— higher and half-eaten by the wrong version of virtue
Even cattle need new pastures sometimes according
To his college roommate flocks have "flight zones"
In the future our bodies will have engines
Sunk into the excised wings of our backs
Next to laundry baskets where our undergarments rest in
Apartment dryers as calmly as fatter worms under rocks
Heaven is supposed to enter our libido
In the fall churning us into white drifts

PILAR GRAHAM

WILD PRAYER

This will be the summer I begin dying to myself, and like any crazy bird, I spin circles, pluck out my tail feathers—all before I teach myself how to fly, again. It will feel like a mid–life crisis, but people who are close to me say, I'm a bit too young for that.

I know there's a resistance, a fight to escape from myself, and the only way I can rise (to any occasion, agree with myself) is to come to terms with the truth of who I am, and then, figure out what to do with this information.

Wild clue: I know I don't want (or know how) to be content. Each day it begins to feel like the continuation of a slow death. Eventually, I realize by identifying this inner resistance will include knowing that I must surrender, until my bones finally give way, shifting and transforming into an eclipse, and I am able to relax into a kind of comfort that is vital to transcend.

For human survival, we must reach this sacred point, an entry, and once its crossed, there's no reason to look back.

I spent years looking to an oak tree for answers. I write poems about the designs I find in bark, convinced I'm simply talking to myself.

For the next five years, I'll continue to sit on your back deck, becoming lost to the natural world. I'll see my first blue heron, and when our gazes lock, each of us will be afraid to make the first move…it's kind of that way, too, when you're too comfortable in a relationship, and neither one has a reason to leave the other, but you know you're not "in love," and somebody has to make the first move. I witness grace when the blue heron finally breaks our stare, and like a thief, slowly tiptoes in broad daylight through the overgrown blonde grass, until he becomes a lovely gray speck in my memory.

Healing should be more organic.

I don't know the big, fancy, or new age words to describe personal

transformation; instead, I continue to write poems under big scrub oak trees, read nonfiction essays, and become easily bored on the subject of "Emotional Intelligence (EI)" that keeps coming up in my Internet searches. Last time I heard this terminology was from an employer, decades ago, in Marin County who claimed he was a shaman, but all I remember is the way he'd lean his pelvis into the side of my body to point out edits at my computer.

According to the New Oxford American Dictionary definition of a shaman is:

> A person regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of good and evil spirits, esp. among some peoples of northern Asia and North America. Typically such people enter a trance state during a ritual, and practice divination and healing.

I never saw this "shaman" perform healings, but I did hear heaps of hype around the office about the book written by Daniel Goleman, "Emotional Intelligence," and I wondered if there was a connection to shamans and the latest pop in mainstream: new age intellectuality? Quantity (or mainstream) isn't always so telling, so I had to question the meanings in the obvious; therefore, if emotional intelligence is the latest discourse in new age thinking (learning how to perceive, reason, understand, and manage emotions), then perhaps there might be something behind the language that is feeding the public with what they want to hear? Many will argue that emotional intelligence is not real, cannot be measured (as maybe the case with modern-day shamans, a bit ironic), and should not be linked with the personality. Regardless, I believe if you offer food, they will come out in flocks to eat, regardless if it's stale. Interestingly enough, and over ten years later, you can buy Goleman's hardcover book, "Emotional Intelligence," for $0.01 (used) on Amazon. That brings in to question, has the mold already begun on this this day-old bread?

* * *

My breath is shallow against the backdrop of cars steadily streaming past my "post-breakup home." Statements circle in my head, "This is your new apartment, Pilar." These are the sounds of my new home:

suburbia. It's Monday evening in Fresno: a car door slams tight, windows slam shut, an air conditioner kick on···humhum, rattlerattle. The rod iron gate just slapped itself shut, someone is coming, or going, and then, more car doors and windows seal themselves shut, and the air kicks on.

Any process connected to survival is sure to repeat.

HERA NAGUIB

GHAR-E-HIRA

From the sky he hurtled
to the cave opening, a shaft
knifed into its whorl of isolation,
commanding,
utter, utter.
Nape under neck, we jostled
in the noose of his embrace.
Utter, utter, he demanded and
cut from me, clean and virginal, a cry.
I fled in delirium, leaping
down the mountain's stony thigh,
until wherever I looked, he filled the sky,
his eyes bright and wild.
Utter, utter
until the cacti rose up like words,
the dizzy beetles punctuated
thick air; until what I uttered
stirred the desert like a gilded river
running from the cave's jagged cervix.

HERA NAGUIB

I COME FROM A LONG CRY

torn from a rain bird's throat
on early summer mornings, from a desert
whose air of fair constancy
I breathe, afraid of thunder, graves, and
the sudden dead; afraid of
the cries of beaten children, and anger
off its leash; afraid of alleys
in darkness, each rustle a fang on the long
walk home. There are people
and things in my mind who think they were
me: the boy who taped her
breasts flat and protagonists from long summer
reads. I come from a pack
of girls who dragged a thin, limber boy across
the gravel, the pay back
to his big brother. No, I come from the crackle
under his back, the dust of stones,
from my long and white silence. I am weaned
from the season's midriff,
the stench of the ground dank with the city's
monsoon, from the pull
of its roots. At nights, I run like its long canal,
dried off its course, but pent up
in every native's dream, to each of my lovers
who still teach me that love
is but a weary, nameless thing. They come
with ceremonies, wrists flamed
with marigolds, and hard hitdrums then leave
at black outs from the back

streets. Sometimes, I'll wake up in their gutters,
the choking smell of burnt
coal, diffusing four ways, four places all stuffed
in a word as small as home.

REGINA DiPERNA

CONCEPTION POEM

A night like other nights. Beer cans
dot their apartment, a constellation

of aluminum: a few crushed ones
in the wastebasket, a near-empty

or two on the counter, a cold one
pressing a water ring into the nightstand.

My father's DNA is smeared along
the rim of each one. My mother's is caught

in the teeth of a comb, the stubbed out
cigarettes in the ashtray. The analog TV

is turned down low, the grainy screen
just slick enough to catch the silhouette

of their movements. I was a shadow
crossing the room. I was night advancing

blindly between sleep and third shift.
All over town, men punch their cards,

glasses drain, fill, and drain again;
in the creases of buildings, water turns

quietly to rust. He puts on his blue collar,
his work pants stained by oil fingerprints,

leaves. A sitcom laugh track drains into
her dreams—its tinny swell, its chorus

of voices, one fold of the wave
ending as another rises.

REGINA DiPERNA

ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF A LOVER'S DEATH

When Death sends flowers, I slash
off the heads with rusty scissors.
Sometimes living things arrive

cold at the door. This time, peonies. Red
as a fresh organ. I cut the stems in every
direction, shred petals to pulp. Isn't that always

what we're doing here? Shearing the pretty thing
from its root? Slicing down the recognizable
until we see its parts eviscerated?

I stuff them back in the oblong box
they came in with a note—*fuck yourself.*
I don't send it. Instead I light them on fire

and watch smoke pour from the mouth
of the thing, that mashed up casket of soft
red matter, that fire eating through the floor.

REGINA DiPERNA

POEM AT THE END OF FEBRUARY

What is permanence? I walked you
to your car, my street still ravaged

from the weekend ice storm, magnolia
branches crisscrossing the sidewalk

like symbols in an inscrutable equation.
Tell me about love, the velvet curtain

of your heart rising. I kissed you
goodbye, said good luck for one reason

or another. You wore black, carried
a black bag. Behind you, a power line

hung slack across a picket fence.
And grief? I could see trace marks

of how it was, how every branch,
gutter, windshield wiper was covered

in an exo-skeleton of ice, how
frozen rivulets between shingles

made every roof look like the ribs
of a slow, beautiful animal. *What*

is the difference between sleeping
and stepping into a silent room?

I searched for my keys, feeling for
their jagged metal, that home shape.

You shut the door of your car, and we
were back in our own inner museums—

the roped–off walls and floors
of the mind, the bones arranged

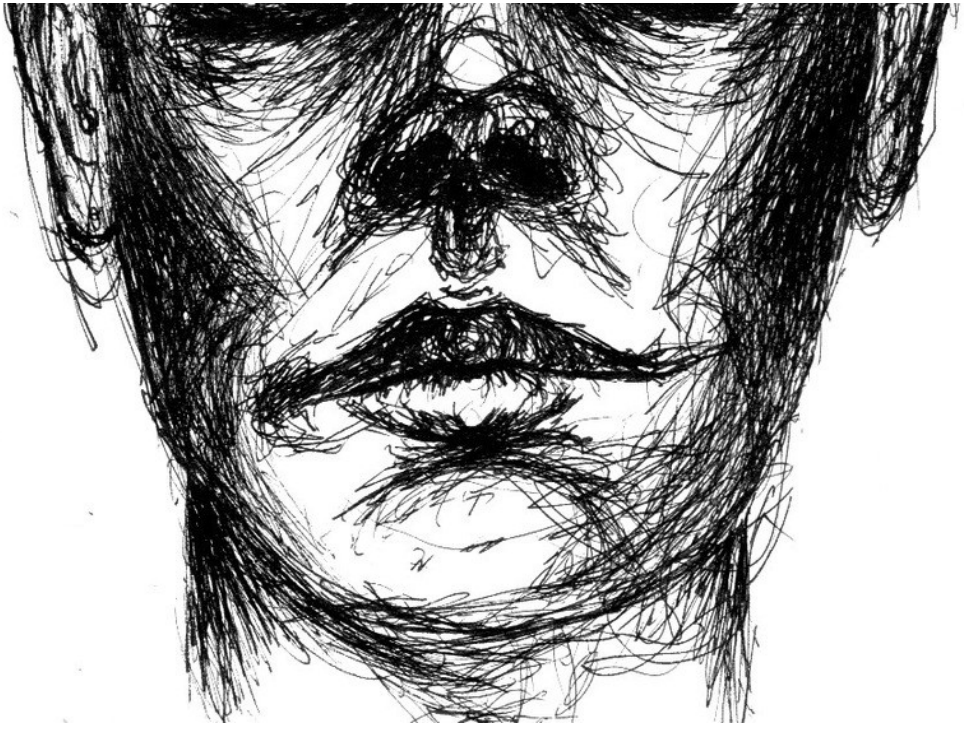
just so, the private booths from which
we watch ourselves. *Tell me*

what you were in the life before
this life. From a broken branch,

a crow peeled back a ribbon of wood.
On the wall, a white moth

shook the cold from its wings
and rested along the brick.

DANIELLA CLAYTON | *Hypnagogic*



DANIELLA CLAYTON | ***Silence***

JONATHAN SENERIS

THE MATADOR

On the morning of my thirty-first birthday, Rachel woke up early to make me lemon-zest pancakes from scratch. She felt an ant on her arm and looked at the box of sugar in her hand, and then I heard her scream from across the house. It's my birthday, I thought, and fell back asleep.

She threw the box in the garbage and substituted Splenda, which was untouched. After breakfast, I did the dishes and cleaned the counters with bleach. I get a few ants every spring, I explained, embarrassed and squashing them under scraps of paper. With the counter cleared and shiny, I promised they'd be gone soon.

The next morning, I stumbled into the kitchen for yogurt and granola. As I was squeezing honey over my breakfast, I noticed a black fleck, like a hair. I held the bottle of honey up to the window. Ants would have had to shimmy their way through the tightened cap, only to drown in sixteen fluid ounces of honey. I threw it out, along with the maple syrup we'd just bought.

I'd seen ants behave this way before. When my dad was alive, I cleaned his room on one of his yearly vacations to the Philippines. Carrying a garbage bag and holding my breath until I got his windows open, I threw out his old soda cans and cookie sleeves, and I vacuumed under his computer and around his bed. I bleached his bathroom and washed his sheets. And the next morning, I went into my bathroom and found dozens of ants on my counter, clustered around a puddle under my Listerine. I'd cut off their food supply, and in desperation, they wandered into the next room, where they found and drank my mouthwash. Most were on their backs, antennae swirling dizzily from the alcohol. One was trying to walk. Gently, I slid a piece of paper under them, dropped them into the sink, and turned on the water.

This was the first time I had an ant problem since he died, but these ants were especially small, like the razor stubble was around his sink. Ant traps, I noted, and we left for her place.

Rachel lived in an old apartment in Park Slope, across the street from a new, ultramodern building with floor–to–ceiling windows and no curtains. She liked to compare it to a fishbowl. Every time she looked out her window she saw her neighbors eating dinner, getting ready for bed, walking around in their pajamas. I gave her my dad's old binoculars.

On a date, we took the F train to Coney Island. The rides were closed for the winter, but there was an aquarium at the end of the boardwalk. I lingered near a small shark tank with three sharks, two tortoises, and a ray. It seemed a precarious mix, but the sharks just circled around and around with vacant, unfocused eyes. One tortoise faced the corner like a disciplined child, looking uneasily over its shoulder.

We watched a lobster, and agreed it was disgusting. I told her a lobster is largest animal I have ever killed intentionally. In culinary school, I was assigned to hold one down with my bare hand and split its head open with a chef's knife. Watching that lobster in the aquarium, I was glad. It had a surly way about it, keeping its back to a corner and its claws aloft like a 19th century boxer. At least my ants were docile, like sheep. I would herd them safely outside if I could.

My kitchen sink appeared to have drooped over time, causing a slight dip in the counter and leaving a gap in the edge along the wall. That's where the ants were coming from. I placed traps over their routes and watched them walk around them.

When ants gathered in the sink, I turned on the tap to wash them down the drain. Some ants can survive in water if they're clustered together. They grab each other and float in a ball, which spins in the water so they can take turns breathing. These ants, as soon as the tap water hit them, started flailing around for something to grab. Every ancient religion has a great flood, over which each god grieves. I pretend the water is herding the ants out of the kitchen, giving them a shot to be castaways underground. The alternative is my thumb and a scrap of paper.

"I just killed the biggest ant I've ever seen," Rachel said one morning, pointing to a crumpled paper towel on the counter. "I think it might be the queen."

"I think queens are pear shaped," I said, remembering an encounter from my childhood that gave me nightmares.

Since these ants were unusually tiny, I assumed she saw a regular ant that had wandered inside. But I looked up ant queens on the internet, and she was right. I had covered the gap behind the sink in Combat Ant Gel, which advertises effectiveness against the colony as a whole. It's slow-acting, so the ants could eat it and still bring some back to the queen. Like most insecticides, its active ingredient is a nerve agent. In humans, a nerve agent causes nausea, burning of the eyes or lungs, followed by persistent seizures. Death comes later via asphyxiation, after the lungs stop working.

The morning after application, scores of dead ants lay on top of each other, like they'd washed up on a beachfront behind my sink. A few marched over the fallen. There were so many more than I'd expected. Now their queen lay among them, wrapped in a white paper towel, which I placed softly with all the other paper towels at the top of the garbage.

We watched The Matador on my computer. I was at the refrigerator, getting something to drink. Tiny ants still wandered my bare, spotless kitchen counter. For dinner, I had prepared our food on the table.

On the television, a Spaniard hid a sword behind a cape, pointing it at a watchful, bleeding bull. Its horns reminded me of ant antennae, the matador's cape of paper towels. As I stood over the counter and flattened some in quick, decisive motions, I imagined that they never saw it coming. When I killed one, I tried to get the onlookers right away, in case they understood.

Later, as I washed the dishes, stragglers circled my kitchen counter. They were gathering in the halo of light under the lamp, maybe twenty ants, all loitering around one spot. My conjecture was that they were lost without their queen and following the light. I'd never seen so many in one place without purpose. The ones moving slowest, I guessed, were either poisoned or starving. Given their unusual clustering, I took out my near-empty can of Raid and held it over the counter. Only vapors came out. The aroma of insecticide filled the kitchen.

There are an estimated ten quadrillion ants on the planet.

I reached for a rolling pin.

Ten minutes later, a dozen more were in the same spot. One crawled up the lamp toward the bulb. They reminded me of islanders trying to appease a volcano.

When an ant dies of poison, it folds its legs under its body and drops its antennae, making a compact husk. In the light, one ant hovered over a husk. It started to walk away, then circled the husk several times before walking right up to it and, almost touching, stopped.

My big head was right over him, and his little head was right over the corpse. He waved his left antenna, then his right, over and over, the way an EKG machine records the wavy signals of a heart. He did this for a long time.

A week ago, its colony was thriving on sugar. Now they were decimated, the few survivors exploring a horror show of curled-up bodies on a Formica countertop.

Another ant approached. The first ant snapped out of it, and they walked away toward the sink. I left the lamp on, crept quietly upstairs, and crawled into bed.

BRETT JONES

MISSING CHEYENNE

Hank and Waylon on the jukebox,
biting chicken wings to the bone,
crunching to the marrow, scrounge

pizza shop dumpsters and orchards,
while Willie and George are singing
songs about Wyoming, about hollers,

songs about drinking whiskey, bleached
bones of dead cattle and lost children,
dusty answers in beer–cans and car–seats.

Those who say, "I hate honky–tonk" have never been
broken down, West of Illinois or South of Kentucky.

Their ears have been tarnished,
smoking alone in crowded rooms
stuttering the importance of age.

When everyone disappears for good, fireworks
fall from the skies and fanged amoebas drink
warm marrow from our charred bones, foliage

growing at the sight of blood and death,
tomorrows bringing strangers with tails,
beards growing on sea–cucumbers, slick.

BRETT JONES

UNFINISHED BREAKFAST

Slipped on black ice in the driveway,
rested in the cold snow for a minute,

thought about the permanence of death,
melting icicles falling to impale vampires,

majestic sadness of breath now gone.

I hate the way nights get so late,
the way fiends hate desert
stoplights at five in the morning,

headlights streaming in rear view
mirrors, ribbons strung
out on empty ironwood branches.

KATIE DARBY MULLINS

POSSUM KINGDOM

When Jason was eleven years old, Jason's mom started sleeping in the basement with the door locked. That way, if an intruder found his way into the house, he wouldn't find her. Jason slept alone upstairs with an aluminum baseball bat. His father had left years ago.

He hadn't realized she was doing it, at least not at first: Jason's mother was slowly moving into the basement and locking the door behind her. He did notice that when he would come home from school, she'd jump when the door opened; he noticed that she didn't like to have her back turned to anyone else in the room. She seemed to always have some kind of a weapon on her. But then, one day, she was just gone. Jason wanted to take care of her, to make her feel safe enough to leave the basement, but he never could. Sometimes she wouldn't even eat the meals he left at the basement door for several days. She wasn't going to take the chance of running into another person, even Jason. He was convinced it had something to do with the Possum Kingdom murders. Every night, Jason ate dinner in front of the TV and watched the horrible story unfold. Photos of four or five women, all bottle-blondes and make-upped, were broadcast on the news every night for over a month—women just kept going missing, and turning up at Possum Kingdom Lake brutally murdered and raped. Everyone in town was addicted to the murders. So when the killer turned out to be a sixteen-year-old boy who had a fake ID and lured local women to his campsite from bars, all of Fort Worth breathed a sigh of relief.

All teenagers became suspect. Women all had pepper spray and locked their doors. And of course, Jason's mom moved downstairs, leaving Jason alone in the house.

The basement had always scared Jason — it was little more than a bomb shelter, just one big, cold, concrete room. That's why it shocked Jason when his mother started spending so much time down there, decorating it, showering down there. The whole room smelled like cat piss, even though there wasn't a cat down there. It was too dark to keep any plants alive, and she'd never been much of a gardener anyway, so

there were sharp, brown vines in hanging baskets; skeletons of the leaves and flowers that she would drag down with her. She started carrying her possessions down—photo albums, a television, her curling iron.

By the time Jason was fifteen, he felt he had been living alone for almost four years. He survived by cashing his mother's disability check at the convenience store down the street where the manager took pity on him—for a cut off the top. He did all of the shopping—he had his hardship driver's license, and though his mother still technically stayed in the house, he was responsible for her. Sometimes he sat at the door and tried to talk to her about things, but he could always hear the TV running in the background. She responded sometimes.

Jason's mother completely withdrew from society. It made Jason sick to think about, but he told himself, *hey, what can you do?* He had almost forgotten how it was before. He had forgotten what she looked like. He remembered her perfume smelled like baby powder, but she almost certainly didn't smell like that anymore. He didn't buy her perfume.

Sometimes it was easier to pretend she was dead. Sometimes he was convinced she actually was.

He had been having feelings he couldn't control. One day, he stood up in the middle of class and walked out without saying a word. A few weeks ago, someone had shoved him—maybe even on accident—in the hallway, and Jason punched him, broke his nose. He was afraid the school would call his house, but the kid lied—said Jason hadn't done it, and he didn't know who had. The worst, though, were the dreams—he had at least some control over his real life, but he was completely helpless at night, a slave to whatever horrible things he was obsessed with. When Jason finally asked his mother if he could live down there with her, she was hesitant.

"Jason," his mother called up, sounding like she was at the bottom of a pit, "you know that I don't have much space to judge people. But you're fifteen. It's crazy that you want to sleep in the basement with your mother. What's got you scared?"

But Jason didn't have to say anything, because what had him scared was the same thing that had his mother scared. He wondered

why she wouldn't open the door.

"Mom? Just open the door, Mom. I just want to talk about it."

"Maybe you can stay with Juan," she said.

"But Mama, who will feed you?" he asked. He didn't want to understand the long pause that followed.

"I'll be fine," she said, and suddenly, somehow, he knew that she hadn't been locking out intruders all these years: she'd been locking out Jason.

"Are you sure?" Silence. "Then I'll call Juan," Jason said, trying not to show that he knew why they were on opposite sides of a locked door. "Just for awhile until you're ready. I'm sure I'll come back soon."

"Good, good," she said. "You're a good boy. I'll miss you."

He packed his bags and moved to Juan's that night. Juan's mother made spaghetti. Guadalupe rolled her eyes and said, "Great, now I have two stupid brothers instead of one. Gag me," and Juan's father said, "*Bienvenido* a la Joneses!" But Jason wasn't sure what that meant.

"Dude, does your dad speak Spanish all the time?" Jason asked Juan quietly.

"Only on special occasions. And even then, not very well."

"Should I reply in Spanish?"

"Do you even know any?"

"I guess not," Jason admitted.

Juan, his best friend at school, was the only person who knew how Jason was really living. Juan was from somewhere out West, and he was also fifteen: he had a stringy moustache, stringy blond hair that needed to be cut, and an old pair of bright green Converse shoes that his sister outgrew. Both of his parents were white, but Juan explained to Jason that his dad had a "sense of humor," so his full given name was Juan Pedro Jones.

Juan's family seemed to be making the thoughts worse, though —or at least Juan's sister, Guadalupe, was. She was three years older than they were and she was beautiful: in fact, sometimes, Jason had dreams where he and Guadalupe were mermaids. She'd come to him on a dolphin or a whale with her shirt ripped and torn, and she'd take him

to an underwater kingdom. Jason sometimes wondered if he was gay because of the princess–mermaid stuff in the dreams, but was pretty sure he wasn't, because he usually got to see her boobs. She was the perfect woman.

But Jason's good dreams about dolphins turned into bad dreams about the campsites at Possum Kingdom State Park. In August, at the beginning of his sophomore year of high school, the tone of the dreams changed dramatically, but he willed himself to forget them . He didn't want to remember. Eventually, he knew the solution was just to stop sleeping.

The Joneses didn't really have room for another person, so it had been generous—but kind of uncomfortable—that they allowed Jason to stay. Juan gave him his sleeping bag and told him they could camp out in the living room, which was the exact opposite of what Jason wanted to do. Juan slept on the couch, and Jason stayed up all night with the television at volume 3, his ears pressed up against the speaker trying to hear whatever the infomercials were saying. It kept him awake to pretend to be so concerned about ear hair trimmers and headbands. And the next morning, when Juan woke up and saw him like that, sitting straight up, still wearing his clothes, sleeping bag still rolled, he shook his head and said, "Dude, this isn't like your house. You can't just stay up all night watching TV."

"I've been having these dreams," he said. "Do you remember the Possum Kingdom murders?"

"Kind of," Juan said."Didn't they catch the guy?"

"The boy. It was a boy. And anyway, that's what I've been dreaming about. I can't get it out of my head," he said. "I guess the whole thing bothered me more than I realized. Those women—they were so beautiful—but then I go to them, I hold their hands while they die. Sometimes their faces melt onto me."

"Metal," said Juan.

"Not funny, man. This is every night. I can't sleep. I'm losing my mind," he said.

" You know, we could go out there, smoke a little—maybe it'll make the dreams stop."

"I'll go with you," said Guadalupe from behind them.

"Lupe, I didn't know you were standing there," said Juan, "and you are not invited."

"Come on—I was planning on going camping out there this weekend anyway, me and a bunch of girls. Sophie, Margie, you know—everyone."

"Which means a bunch of guys, right?"

"Look, if you guys go, Mom will let me go."

"There are conditions," said Juan. "No one is to know I'm your brother, so I can be one of the guys. And you have to give us beer."

"I don't think this is a good idea," said Jason.

"Shut up," said Juan, punching him in the shoulder. "It's a great idea. Do we have a deal?"

Lupe grunted, "Fine," and they shook on it.

Mrs. Jones dropped them off during the afternoon, when the sun was sitting right on top of the lake. The lake smelled like dead fish and wet, decaying leaves. There was a dock with a bunch of tire floats attached to it, and a jar full of dirt sitting on the shore; probably evidence that people had been fishing there earlier, but had left. Empty beer cans were everywhere.

"OK," said Mrs. Jones, "here are the rules. First, the only boys here will be Juan and Jason. Second, absolutely none—" She kicked a smashed an empty beer can. "—of this. Third, Juan, I know you've got your cell phone; call me if either of these things happens."

"Mom, that's not fair—" Guadalupe started, but Mrs. Jones gave her a look.

"I will stay here until Margie and Sophie get here. Then I'll leave. Guys, I'm counting on you to make good decisions tonight." After the girls got there, Jason realized how anxious he'd been and began to relax. They built a fire, they saw some butterflies and raccoons, and Jason and Juan sat on the dock and dipped their toes in the water, which was cool and deep grey; most of the lakes in North Texas were brown, even at night. It was actually beautiful. He lay back on the dock and put his hands behind his head, watching hawks fly in the sunset. He squinted and tried to see the stars before nightfall: he'd always wondered if there was a trick to seeing them during the day. He

knew they were always there.

Everything changed when it got dark. The fire seemed to grow; it was suddenly the height of a person, and it looked like it was dancing, hands in the air, head thrown back; it kept getting bigger. Snaps of light were breaking and popping off, and pretty soon, Jason could only see people's faces by the firelight. The girls were turning yellow and red, and looked like they were nothing but shivering heat themselves.

Then the boys came. A truckload of boys who were three or four years older than Jason. They brought beer and wine coolers. One of them slapped Margie on the butt, and she giggled. Juan pulled Jason aside and offered him weed, which he smoked, and then one of the older boys pulled Jason aside and offered him beer, which he drank. Juan had started to hit on Sophie. Jason was alone, so he had another beer, and before long, he was feeling dizzy and watching one of the boys talk to Guadalupe across the dancing fire. They seemed all lit up and taunting him, almost like they were onstage.

Jason tried to pull her aside and ask her to walk around the lake, but she waved him off and kept talking to one of the older boys—one who had brought alcohol and was wearing a letter jacket with a patch for all-state wrestling on the sleeve. Jason kept saying *please,* but she wasn't listening. Women never listened to Jason, he realized. He'd always thought he just didn't have anything to say, but he did have something to say. He grabbed Guadalupe by the wrist, maybe a little too hard, because she pulled away and said, "Watch it, jackass." And he was watching—he was watching her touch her chest and laugh at the other boy's jokes like some whore. He couldn't let her keep acting like this; the other boys would think she was nothing but a goddamn whore.

"Come on, Lupe," he said, using her nickname for the first time. It tasted like icing in his mouth; sweet, full. If her nickname tasted that good, what would she taste like? "Your mother only let you come out tonight because she thought you'd be helping me overcome my fear." He realized he wasn't acting very afraid. He looked over his shoulder as if suspicious. "Just walk around the lake once, just one time."
Lupe rolled her eyes. "Whatever," she said, and she grabbed her beer can, and she set out towards the lake. "I'm only doing this once, so you

better keep up, you little freak." Jason hurried after her, but only after looking back at the older boy—the one with the letter jacket who had been flirting with her—and giving him a smile.

She started pointing at things; they were facing a rock formation off in the distance. "That's Hell's Gate," she said, "which probably doesn't make you less afraid, either." She turned 180 degrees and then pointed to the space in the distance behind them. "That's Camp Grady Spruce. They bring elementary school kids out here so they can go camping. I went in fifth grade," she said.

"They didn't do that my year," said Jason.

"Right. The murders." She turned back towards Hell's Gate and kept walking. "There's not really much to see," she said, and they plunged further into the darkness. It got cold over towards Hell's Gate, and the further they got from the fire, the harder time Jason had seeing Lupe at all, save the slight reflection from the moon on her wavy blond hair. She was blue, kissed by night—almost like she was submerged, the beautiful mermaid from Jason's dreams. When they got under heavy tree cover, he couldn't even see that; he could barely see his own hands.

"You still back there?" she asked, and he waited a minute before saying, "Yeah, yeah, I'm here."

"Don't scare me like that," she said. "Look, you've seen everything. Let's head back." Jason was silent again. He could feel twigs snapping under his feet, and he was focusing on sitting his feet down so lightly that he couldn't hear them, only feel them. There was a power in this land.

"I'm not kidding. Let's get out of here."

"Are you scared, Lupe?" Jason asked, and reached out into the darkness to find the small of her back. "It's OK."

She jumped away from him. "Jason, that's not cool, OK? Let's just go." She turned around and started walking towards Jason, who stayed still in the dark; she walked into him, and he wrapped his arms around her and she screamed and shrieked.

"Let go," she said. She was crying. "Please let go. I want to go back. Please."

And for a second, Jason held her even tighter, and he smelled her hair and it smelled like vanilla, and he felt how tightly he could

wrap his arms around her slender frame. Her arms were pinned to her sides, and she tried to kick, but he was stronger than she was. He held her there, and finally, she stopped struggling, and was limp, sobbing in his arms. "Please, please," she said. "Let me go." He could feel her body spasm, and he moved one hand to her upper back so that he could feel her bra through her shirt. He whispered in her ear, "Two conditions."

"What do you want?"

"First, you don't ever tell anyone about this," he said. "Second, I want to kiss you."

She shook her head 'no'. "Jason, I don't understand, why are you doing this?"

He opened his mouth to say something, but he didn't have an answer. He grabbed her hair, pulled her head back, and kissed her neck slowly: it was soft and warm, just like he thought it would be. She was still crying—she cried the whole time. "What the fuck, man?" she screamed. "What the fuck?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Are you kidding? Sorry? That's all you've got?"

"Maybe I wouldn't have grabbed you if you hadn't acted like you were afraid of me.

She punched him in the stomach, hard, and he dropped to his knees. He could hear the twigs crunching beneath his weight and feel them snap against his legs. "Fuck you," she said, and she headed back towards camp, leaving Jason alone in the Possum Kingdom woods. He slowly got up and regained his breath and followed the light source as best he could until he was back out by the lake.

He sat there looking at his reflection. It was distorted in the face of the dark water. Now Jason was more afraid than ever.

J. SCOTT BROWNLEE

A CONFLAGRATION

My father's heart
Burns a pillar of fire
The size of an oak tree
Engulfed by lightning.

I am helpless against
The procession of it
Through his chest
Into mine—
Which is blind,
Symptom-less
The way all disease is
Before first igniting.
Love, though, isn't helpless.
The flames' height insures
He will be consecrated.

Each time he tries to say
My name—riddled
By tubes that root
Through him—

It comes out as, Fire.

J. SCOTT BROWNLEE

WENDELL BERRY'S ANGEL

Appearing once, she said simply,
"Worship
quiet." & then, later,
"Don't worship me.
I am fallen." "But
your wings," I said.
"Don't look
at them,"
she answered. "Don't
approach me, even."
She stood cloaked
in fine silk the color
of lightning—
or perhaps
he did. Gender, false logos,
be damned.
I still don't know which—
just that a gospel
entered me
as if a bullet
in my brain
I cannot remember.
The story
I don't understand
is the one told to me
by that angel's absence
—grace's first
departure into winged silence
levitating
from me,
blue eyes burned black

by the fiery core
of that single vision:

[*]

If grace exists, it does so
quietly—& far away.
& without staying put.
& because
of its tendency to leave
—an all-too-human
quality—it cannot be
worshiped. God escapes,
Worship me, if
there is one, I say. & if not,
still does so—
not-approaching
no one
to teach us
to focus on the presence
of love
interacting with nothing
between us & it.
If I am called
by my belief in nothingness
to account for
angels, the truth is
no angel
visited me.
I made each detail up:

the silk, the wings, the uncertain
gender—
though if you ask me to prove
my belief—
explanation I have
for the nothing I see
—why I believe
in nothing, still, though
love dwells
nowhere
close to me—
I will swear
it happened.

MARY QUADE

TALE OF THE LOST GIRL

I don't notice things until I'm lost—
the missing path, a puzzle of details that will
come together with cleverness. I have a map, but
I don't find myself there—nor this very spot, this log
rotting to softness, and on it, lit by morning,
a large egg, chipped open,
no chick, but evidence of yolk, slick around it—
a clue. Bird, lost. Egg, found—by *me*—
suddenly, a direction, an *unraveling*.
Then the voice saying, You know to stay still,
they will miss you, they will find—*what*?
What would they discover that I have neglected?
So I move to find more—
coyote scat scratched into dirt—I recognize that;
the rush of vertigo on a bluff,
a tick looking for flesh—
familiar, familiar.
Are you looking?
Have you described me to the searchers?
Mind you—you're falling quickly behind.

MARY QUADE

TALE OF THE GOOSE

This is the matter—the moment moving in your mind,
drifting like a goose—it looks so pretty, you think to yourself,
Of course, of course—a nodding dismissal. You've forgotten
the bruise of its bill, its angry intent—
you see pure white, imagine the down—you even
say *feathers* under your breath, the pleasure of saying
what you want to feel. The goose—hasn't it an egg?
Isn't that worth? It drifts—you cannot see
its feet, but that doesn't bother you because
you are already taking off your shoes, reaching over the water—
notice its muttering—reaching
for its hunger, empty handed.

MARY QUADE

STINGING THINGS

after shootings in a Cleveland public high school

You were pruning the crabapple—
its branches choked with suckers
and callous sour fruit—
when something stung you on the ear,
as if to say to its pliant softness,
Now hear this,
the burn growing like hot gossip.

Then you saw the nest hanging above,
a child's head, wrapped in bandages,
disembodied, and the warnings
brimming from the mouth,
a tantrum of glassy wings.
Inside, chambers and chambers of flightless
angers—substance, but not yet shape.

RACHEL SQUIRES BLOOM | *DRINKING THE KOOL-AID*

JULIE MARIE WADE
ID BRACELET

*

Everyone is frightened of loss. This is the lesson I learn from the teachers in my first year of school with their color codes and musical messages and locks on every visible door. Mrs. Walters kneels before me. I am three years old since yesterday, with long fingers already and one freckle on my right hand that helps me tell it apart from the other hand—the one that assists but doesn't lead—the one that is bashful and not as bright.

"Which do you color with?" she wants to know, and I say "right" the way my mother says "you are right-handed," and Mrs. Walters looks pleased to see how good I am at collecting the names for things. I hold them all, trembling, in a basket on a pulley system inside my brain, so when I am looking for a word, I tug the rope and draw the basket down; eagerly, I peer inside.

"We're going to put the bracelet on your right hand to help you remember that it's there." I think of *bracelet* and then of *jewels.* Bracelets sleep in long boxes on beds made of cotton balls. I have seen them, asleep in my mother's drawers. Now she clasps the cold metal around my wrist, so tight it makes a shape on my skin. "Never lose this," Mrs. Walters commands. "If you're ever lost, this bracelet will help you find your way home again."

"Is it magic?" I ask.

"No, but it's important."

Once everyone has a bracelet, even the boys, Mrs. Walters gathers us in a circle for story time. But there is no book today, no drum-beat for accompaniment or tambourines for a rousing chorus.

We sit cross-legged on our carpet squares and wait for the principal's tall, shiny shoes to step to the front of the room.

"Good morning, everyone," says Mrs. Ellis. She has red lips and black hair and wears a scarf at her neck that flops like a flower in wind. "Today we're going to talk about strangers. Who here can tell me what a stranger is?"

No one offers a good enough definition because we are all playing with our bracelets or thinking about snack time or watching for the ducklings in the corner to poke their fuzzy yellow heads against the cage. "A stranger is someone you don't know," Mrs. Ellis explains. "We want to make sure all of you understand that it isn't safe to talk to strangers, just like it isn't safe to cross the street without holding someone's hand." *So what do you do if there's a street and a stranger and no other way to get across?*

"Mrs. Walters has just given you each an ID bracelet. This is a way to help you remember who you are and where you live, in case you ever get separated from your family. It says your full name, your parents' names, your street address, and your phone number. You can show it to a policeman or a crossing guard or a clerk at the store. Any of these people can help you if you are lost." Mrs. Ellis smiles at us and laces her fingers together in front of her skirt. "Does anyone have any questions?"

I want to know if you have to *know* the policeman or the crossing guard or the clerk at the store. Aren't they strangers, too, unless your mother has had them over to dinner? But when I pull down the basket to look inside, my words are jumbled like socks in the wash. I cannot find the ones that fit together.

"Mom?" I call from the back seat. "Who is a stranger?"

"Anyone you don't know," she replies, her voice clear and

certain as a draw-string doll.

"But...isn't everyone a stranger first?" There they are, at last, the words I have been searching for! I think of Jamie from class, her mother with the huge dark eyes—like the owl in my picture book. We didn't know them at all until my mother struck up a conversation with Mrs. Karkonen in the hall. They traded numbers on scraps of paper, and now I was invited to Jamie's house to play. *Weren't they strangers, too? Weren't they?*

At home, my mother piles warm laundry on the living room rug. "I have potatoes to peel," she says, "so I need you to fold these for me."

"How?"

"Put like things together with other like things. All things of a kind: shirts, pants, underwear." I watch her lift one towel and pair it with another. "See how they go together," my mother says—"like they're members of the same family."

Now I sit on the floor and study my surroundings. I hold the new words like lemon drops behind my teeth, then turn them over slowly on my tongue: *draperies, fireplace, mantle, settee*. Words have flavors, I marvel, the way the candy I will not accept from strangers tastes sweet or tart or sometimes both at once. The clock chimes, but it is not a clock only—it's a *grandfather* clock. I like the way words pile up on other words, the way they piggy-back. Not just a plant, but a *jade* plant. Not just a table, but a *coffee* table.

When my mother returns, she finds not much accomplished and me, reclining in the clothes, legs outstretched, inspecting the too-tight bracelet on my right-hand wrist.

"What are you doing?" she wants to know.

"This ID bracelet is pinching me." I hold it out for her to loosen.

She kneels down in the clothes and carefully unclasps the bracelet. "Do you recognize your name?" she asks, pointing to the letters etched on the underside.

I nod. "And this is our address here. These numbers refer to this house." *Why are they numbers instead of words?Why don't houses have names?* "And this is your phone number, the one you memorized. Do you still know it by heart?"

I nod again. "What's this word, at the bottom?"

"That says *Lutheran*," she replies, clasping the bracelet again, this time so it dangles lightly with room to slip my thumb inside.

"Lutheran?"

"It's who we are," my mother recites, her eyes unblinking like the draw-string doll who only says a few things but always like she means them. "It's what we believe."

"But how do you know *I'm* Lutheran?"

"Because *we* are," she says, knees crackling as she stands. "And you are one of us."

I fold the towels and stack them in a tall, terry-cloth column. I look for socks that seem to fit together and roll them up in balls. But the whole time my eyes are roving over that room—the landscape of spoons we never eat with, the cabinets we aren't allowed to open. "Look, but don't touch," she tells me, or "That's only for decoration," or "Didn't you hear what I said?" And I think about that stranger in the kitchen, the apron cinched at her waist, the certain way she moves. *Who says I know her? Who says she knows me?* I listen to my mother, humming show tunes as she strips the potatoes bald.

SARA BORJAS

YOUNG NARCISSUS PRETENDS TO HAVE A SUPERPOWER

She clutches two bunches of grass
in her hands, waves her arms over her head
like floppy bananas, and pretends to be
a weed. Then, she is a tornado whirling
like a dropped penny between her mother
and the TV. Narcissus gathers the living room
into her: the wooden coasters, the Disney movies
on the shelf, the Barbies whose hair she colored
with a black sharpie to look like hers.
And everything blends: her hands
are pillow feathers, her mouth is a glass
of water, her head is a broken kitty magnet
nobody can see.

SUZANNE PARKER

THE JUST CUT FIELD

The dog keeps eating shit
and dead things—mice, snakes,
dismembered frogs—but, first,
he rolls in them. A shoulder,
then the belly, then a quick flip
and the back shifting left and right,
whole body rubbing itself against
what the just cut hay and blades
have revealed. There is no
calling him off his delirium,
tongue agog, hunting, refusing
to loop the field as we usually do,
but smashing forward to find
what only his nose knows
as pleasure. He leaves me stranded
between the choices—
watch and wait as he zigzags
to the logic of desire
or pull him back, clip on the leash.

SUZANNE PARKER

BROKEN GHAZAL: THIRST

The rain is consumed by the sea, its dark, unquenchable thirst.
"I need," the girl whines, hanging off her mother's hand, knowing her thirst.

The salt of the waves prickles the air, can be lifted from the skin, later after swallowing oceans, we rise and stumble to the fridge to slake our thirst.

Every morning demands its ransom and we untangle legs from legs.
Every story has an other moving to the well, bucket swinging with thirst.

Summer soon and the world will shake her thermometer and sweat. As children,
we thought the ices singeing our throats were all we'd ever need, all there ever was of thirst.

You ask me to dance on the lip of the night and I gather up my skirt.
Bring me champagne. Gallons. A sea. Your mouth. I have such a thirst.

DARLENE P. CAMPOS

SIGNING OFF

After getting some groceries in Livingston, Dad and me drove past the Soda Baptist Church and their sign said in big, bold letters 'Jesus Loves Virgins.'

"Damn it, son," he said. "We're going to hell for being horny."

"Maybe we read it wrong, it probably said Jesus Loves Virginia," I said.

"I know Jesus loves a lot of things, but what's in Virginia?" he said, clutching onto his chest. I pulled into our driveway and Mom was standing on the porch with a bottle of water for Dad, waiting for him to roll himself over to her. He started using a walker after his heart attack. He would grip onto his walker and let the wheels roll him wherever he had to go.

"Brandi, I learned something real interesting today," Dad said when he reached the porch. "Jesus don't love us no more."

"What are you talking about, you nutcase?" Mom said.

"I saw a sign at the Soda Baptist Church and it said Jesus Loves Virgins," Dad said and they laughed together.

"Are you sure you didn't make that sign, Dad?" I asked him.

"No, son, I ain't done that in a long time," he sighed.

Dad grew up Baptist, but by his adult years, he wasn't. The thought of getting up early every Sunday to get yelled at by his pastor didn't appeal to him. Dad hated church, so he bought sets of marquee letters and he'd change the sign at the Soda Baptist Church all the time since that was where he used to go. Every time the sign said WE LOVE BAKE SALE SUNDAY, he'd switch it to WE LOVE NAKED MALE BOYS. Sometimes Dad's arrangements were more vulgar than that. When I was in 10th grade, he changed the sign from GOT AN HOUR? ENTER HERE, OF COURSE! To GOT AN HOUR? HAVE INTERCOURSE! At first, the Soda Baptist Church wanted to have Dad fined, but more people stopped in for a service when the sign was funny, so they dropped the charges. Dad hadn't changed a sign since before his heart attack and I doubted he ever would again.

Every night before bed, Dad ate several oranges. He'd sit in front of the TV, peeling them with his pocket knife and squirting juice on the rug. The whole living room smelled like badly made air freshener. When I lived in Houston, Mom called me every day and each time we spoke, she'd complain about the stink of oranges in the house.

"For God's sake, why do you always do that?" Mom asked Dad.

"Helps me go to the crapper," he said. He kept on peeling and getting orange drip on the rug. He had been sick for a while. The doctors at Chief Kina Clinic said part of it was his lifestyle. Dad was over 400 pounds and considered walking to the refrigerator daily exercise. But Dad always said he was ready to die, even when he was younger, so he never seemed interested in staying alive.

"I'm more active than most people," he said at our family barbecue just a year before his heart attack. "I tell you, son, I'd win a gold medal for walking to the fridge in the Olympics."

"Dad, that's not a sport," I said.

"It should be," he said. "Walking to the fridge is hard work, especially on days when I'm tired." Dad got another can of soda, drinking it fast like he always did. Some of the soda spilled onto his shirt, drizzling down his belly, staining his white shirt. I noticed his belly had gotten bigger, but I never told him.

Before I went home to the rez, I was the owner of Big Clem's Pizza, over on Heights Boulevard and West 18th in Houston. Customers would come in like flies at a dump – they were all over the place, but they'd leave their trash behind. No matter how much money I made, I got tired of picking up after them. It was Labor Day and I was counting up my sales for the week when Mom called to tell me Dad had a heart attack. That same night, I took off and I was at Dad's side two hours later at the Memorial Medical Center in Livingston.

"I'm here, Dad," I said. "I made it." He turned his head to me, squinting his eyes, like he didn't recognize me. After a moment, he mumbled, "Damn it Clem, you came all the way up here and you didn't bring me no pizza?"

I moved in with my parents three weeks after Dad's heart attack. I left my most responsible worker in charge of my shop and broke my apartment lease. My younger brother, Keith, lived in San Antonio and was a history teacher at John Jay High School. Keith said he couldn't drop everything and come back to the rez. He said that even when he lived in a studio apartment with a cardboard box for a dining table.

My parents spent most of their lives at Chief Kina Clinic. When I was a kid, Dad was the receptionist and Mom was one of the nurses. Mom retired after thirty years of service, so she stayed home, making quilts to sell for extra cash. But Dad still visited Chief Kina Clinic several times a month for his appointments.

"I hate it here, Clem, it's always colder than a meat locker," he told me.

"Because it's always hellhole outside," I said and flipped through an old National Geographic. Dad watched The Price is Right on the TV hanging from the ceiling, calling out prices for every item that came on.

"That dryer's $560," he said and it was.

"Dad, you only knew the price because that's the same dryer Mom wants."

"And she ain't getting it 'cause it's $560," he said and I laughed a little.

When Dad was finally called for his appointment, he asked me to go in with him. He grabbed onto his walker and I was right behind him with my hands stretched out in case I needed to catch him. Before Dad had his heart attack, he used a metal cane, but he didn't actually need it. He was mugged while shopping in Livingston, so he got the cane to smack future thieves on the head. But he actually needed the walker. The nurse told Dad to step on the scale and his weight was 408.

"You've gained a few since last time," the nurse said.

"Don't you be talking about my weight, I saw you wolfing down a chocolate cake the other day," Dad said and got off the scale. The nurse led us to a cold examination room down the hall and told us the doctor would be in soon.

"Clem, when you was little, you got sick a lot," Dad said. "Strep throat, scarlet fever, whooping cough, everything. Once you couldn't

stop throwing up, so me and Mom took you to the hospital and they pumped you so full of fluids, you pissed on the nurse."

"That's disgusting. Why would you tell me that?" I asked him.

"Because I heard that nurse say something about us being Indians," he said. "So after you were all out of pee, Mom and me grabbed you and took off laughing."

Dr. Whiteshirt came in and checked out Dad's heartbeat. He said it was fine, so Dad asked why the hell he had an appointment in the first place.

"I've got to make sure you're not dead, Mr. Redhawk," Dr. Whiteshirt said.

"That's bunk. You can just check the obituaries," Dad answered.

After the appointment, Dad wanted to stop by the gas station for a bite. He browsed the aisles for a few minutes, looking over what he thought was good for him. Then he grabbed three packs of mini powdered doughnuts, a mega sized chocolate bar, and a can of soda.

The annual pow wow was on again in early June. Mom and Dad had their usual food stand, selling fry bread, peach cobbler, and lemonade. Keith didn't come, but no one really expected him to anyway. The last time he came to the annual pow wow was when me and him were in high school and he spent both days flirting with tourist girls.

"Keith was always a hider," Dad said to me at the pow wow. "I never liked playing hide and seek when you two were little because I knew it would take forever and a day to find him."

"Or maybe you suck at finding people," Mom said, stirring more lemonade. "If you hadn't crashed into my car, we probably would've never met." As the story goes, Mom was driving home from work and Dad rear-ended her at 60 miles an hour. Mom got out of her car, called Dad the biggest idiot in the world, and threatened to run him over, but then Dad asked her out on a date.

"You're the one who braked for no reason," Dad said. "If bad

driving was in the Olympics, you'd win a gold medal."

"There was a baby squirrel crossing the road," Mom told him. "If it weren't for that squirrel, we would've never gotten married."

After the pow wow, I watched TV with Dad, but I mostly watched him peel oranges again. He was wheezing a little and when I pointed it out, he told me I was only imagining it. I wished I had been.

"Son," he said. "If breathing was in the Olympics–"

"Then you'd win a gold medal," I said, shaking my head a little. I went to the kitchen and Mom was there, looking at the bills. She said she was behind on one of her credit cards again, the one she used to pay for Dad's walker.

"I told those idiots I'm behind 'cause they keep forgetting to mail me the bill." She reached to the side of the kitchen table and showed me a stack of bill from the credit card people, all in order. I raised my eyebrows at the sight.

"Don't look at me like that, Clem. If they want their money, they shouldn't be so damn gullible," Mom said.

A little before bedtime, I saw Dad out in the backyard, reaching his hands over his head. He had his knees on his walker, keeping him steady. After a while, he put his hands to his sides and I heard him say, "I'm ready when you are."

"I've never seen you pray before," I said when he came back inside.

"You've never seen me take a crap, don't mean I don't it," he said.

In the middle of the night, I was on the couch, trying to sleep, but then I heard Dad calling my name. He was standing over me, clutching onto his walker.

"I don't feel so good," he said. "Can you take me to the hospital?"

"Sure," I said and put my pants on. "Want me to wake up Mom?"

"No, if you do that, she'll start talking and that'll kill me faster." I helped him get into my car. By the time we got to the hospital, Dad wasn't able to balance himself, so I hopped in front of him and held him by his hands. He looked old. When I was a kid and misbehaved, Dad

would take me by my hands and swing me in the air, telling he was going to toss me up to my grandparents. "They'll take care of you good," he'd say. "I ain't got the time for your messing around."

"I don't wanna see them yet, I'm too little," I'd say. "Put me down, Dad, please. I'll be good, I promise. I don't wanna go up there."

Dad was suffering from heart failure. The doctors said they wasn't much they could do, but he could go to the Texas Medical Center in Houston and see if they could help. Dad said he was okay without treatment, but Mom wasn't.

"You ain't dying on me without a fight, Gary," she told him. "We're going."

"Brandi, I'm 58 years old, I've had a full life," he said.

"That's right you have," Mom said. "Always ate a full plate and now look where it got you." Dad kept saying he didn't want to force himself to live. Mom didn't budge though. She went to their room and started packing bags.

"We're leaving in half an hour," Mom said. "Clem, go put gas in the car."

When I was back from the gas station, Mom and Dad were standing outside of the house with their bags. They got in the car and I sped down the road towards Highway 59. We passed the Soda Baptist Church and Dad told me to stop the car.

"Gary, you ain't changing that sign. We gotta run," Mom said.

"Brandi, I might not ever get another chance," he said. He wobbled himself over to the sign with his box of marquee letters. The sign said PASTOR RAY IS ALWAYS HAPPY TO SEE YOU and Dad slowly added another sentence underneath: JUST CHECK HIS PANTS.

"All right, son, step on it!" Dad said when he was back in the car. He couldn't stop laughing for a while. Mom called him an idiot, but she was laughing too.

After about two hours, we were at the Methodist Hospital. The building was nice, clean, and well lit. But even if it had been made out of gold with jewel crested ceilings, I would've still hated it. The doctors in Livingston said nothing could be done for Dad, so I thought he might end up dying in Houston, which wouldn't be what he wanted. He

always said he wanted to die in his own house, sitting on the couch, with Mom yelling in his ear, just like any other day.

Dad was admitted into the hospital and given a big room with everything he liked – food, TV, and a big bed. The doctors said all they could was monitor him and see if things got better or worse.

"Won't be long now," Dad said. "Clem, when I go, you can have anything of mine you want. Tell Keith he can have my dirty underwear."

"Where is that boy anyway?" Mom said. "I've been calling him since last night. I should drive to San Antonio and smack him."

"He's a history teacher. Maybe he's grading a load of papers," I said.

"Then I'll smack him with those same papers," Mom said. "I changed that boy's diapers and raised him and he can't pick up his damn phone?"

"Ease up there, Brandi. You're giving me another heart attack," Dad said. "If complaining was an Olympic sport, you'd win the gold, silver, and bronze medals." He sunk himself deeper into his bed, closing his eyes. I left the hospital soon after to find a motel to stay in. I ended up going to my pizza shop, seeing Geraldine at the counter. I left her in charge because she was the only worker who actually showed up on time.

"Our customers miss you, Big Clem," she told me. "Is your dad better?"

"He's getting there," I said. "He'll be there soon."

By day three of being in Houston, Dad wasn't looking good. It seemed like he aged ten years overnight. When I'd talk to him, he'd stare at me, not able to understand what I was saying. Mom said the drugs were making him act funny. I took her word for it since she was a nurse for thirty years, but part of me thought Dad was getting ready to leave.

"Have you gotten in touch with Keith?" I asked Mom. She said she did and Keith swore Dad would be fine and hung up.

"He ain't my son," Mom said. "A man who acts like that ain't my son."

"Mom," I said. "I've screwed up before too." And it was true. I wasn't the perfect son. Keith went to college but I didn't. Instead, I spent my time drinking and sleeping with multiple women. It was fun until I took Karen Big Tree on a date. I always liked her and I drove her home drunk as hell because I wasn't thinking right. We weren't hurt, but the next morning, she said she'd never go out with me again because I had peed on her porch in front of her parents.

"So you peed your pants," Mom shrugged. "You did that every night until you were five years old for goodness sake. At least you didn't ditch your father."

On day four, the doctors said Dad would be leaving very soon. Mom thanked them, but that wasn't the kind of leaving they meant.

"He should be gone any day now, Mrs. Redhawk," one of the doctors said. "It happens to everyone."

At lunch time that day, I left the hospital to go grab some food for me and Mom. She wouldn't budge from Dad's bedside. He spent most of his time sleeping or cussing at the nurses who came to check on him. There was a sandwich place up the street, so I parked my car, but I felt nauseous. I turned my car around to go back to the hospital. When I was in Dad's room, Mom told me he was getting worse by the minute. Now he couldn't even recognize her.

"Dad," I said to him. "Dad, I'm here."

"Where did you go?" he said in a voice that didn't sound like him.

"I went to get lunch, Dad," I said. "But I'm here, I'm not leaving again."

"Damn it, Clem," he said. "You mean you went out and came back and you didn't bring me no pizza again?"

On Friday afternoon, day five of treatment, Dad died. Mom missed him by a minute. She had gone to the restroom and rushed back as fast as she could, but she wasn't fast enough. As for me, I had gone to my shop to get him some pizza. It was still warm when I got his room. Even though Dad never showed any fear of dying, I knew he didn't want to go yet. I knew he wanted to be on the couch and he wanted Mom yelling in his ear. If he had gone that way, I would have

been happy.

A few days after Dad was buried on the rez, I packed up my stuff to go back to Houston. Mom reminded me Dad said I could have anything of his I wanted, so before I left, I rummaged through the garage. When I picked out what I wanted, I kissed Mom on the cheek and went out to my car. I drove down the road, slowing down as I got closer to the Soda Baptist Church but their sign had already been changed.

REST IN PEACE, GARY REDHAWK.
WE LOVE NAKED MALE BOYS AND YOU.
GOD BLESS.

SAVANNAH SCHROLL GUZ

Women in Water: Loretta & Pies in the Sky

LUCIA LoTEMPIO

I WANT TO STOP THINKING ABOUT YOU WHEN I MASTURBATE

I am drunk enough to see fat
versions of myself in other girls tumbling

out of your apartment complex & grocery store; I am sad enough
to move with the exactness of blocking, with fear

of not hitting my light, of not furnishing
my lines: slow, precise—I calculate

each movement in relation to its kinetic & caloric value—:
it should sound like I'm not wearing mascara or

like I'm wearing too much mascara. I entertain
two glasses of water to embarrass myself

in front of myself—try to explain: won't have to
ask again later. Head down, I am recruited

by plazas dead-humming with the metallic thrashings of a flagpole—
the way other-room fucking reverberates

on television & frames on-screen-reflections. I want you to leave
to smoke cigarettes, but you don't leave or smoke enough cigarettes:

I twist your shoes in coca-cola & you stick
to linoleum & similar genres of floor: the way hair envelopes

a spoon, strands orbiting an undry head.

LUCIA LoTEMPIO

PROPOSED EVOLUTION FOR FOREPLAY

[a] You make my body too wet to apply sunscreen,
milks off & black-dews eyelashes—grow scales
where I steam & burn like a dragon lady—: color & itch
of wearing kotex for two days. In the oven blacken
grapefruit, ice pick open, exfoliate under each scale
for the hair-screened drain.

[b] I recommend we meet in a hookah bar & read
fungus as it curries root in our right lung:—you eat
lipstick to red our pink squid insides.

[c] Yes—I've heard evolutionary theories of cocks
mushrooming open inside to anchor
out the cum of other cocks—: to mark me
follow these suggestions:
draw an X, from temples to my curves
of chin, with whatever is handy (george-foreman-grease,
clove honey, bird shit before it whites, etc.) as long as it fills
empty scale-cavities & butter-melts.

[d] Saucepans gum your gathered supplies, leave
the burner gassing, avalanche them out slow
on the floor to cool before marking. We wait—:
index leaves in my pocket & throw a chair
across the room as if I've been autumning
with someone else—collapses in perfect equilateral sections,
each a cantaloupe seed neglecting its pulp string umbilical.

LUCIA LoTEMPIO

HOW TO ROLL YOUR TONGUE BACK TO SWALLOW IT

A man with no face will be on screen evolving
his alone time—desire a purer muteness & demand

the studio audience rotten-tomato
the stage: start envelope licking

from the inside, steal yourself in, be certain
friends misinterpret postcards from accidenting

on a moon fleshy with 19 kilometers of ice—
underneath (they say) oceans warm

from the orbit's solitary distaste for Jupiter. Adapt:
crease your body, keep folding, search out

coasters and shag carpet to fill your dead star,
husk fat off to repurpose vertebrae:

you'll need shelving. You won't be fit
for a bed (nor will you be drowsy)—

fearing conversation and petrichor,
chew your skin for umbrella stands.

RYAN KRAEMER

GROWN MEN

I'm at a going away party, smoking alone on the deck, standing beside a group of friends. Not my friends; I don't know any of them. I mean that the six or so of them all seem to be friends. A young woman turns from the group and asks me how I know the honoree, i.e. the guy leaving for Seattle or Portland or someplace like this. I tell her I don't know him and admit I feel a bit foolish about it. I was invited by his sister, I explain, who I met the week before through work. Why had I come, she asks, to see the sister?

"No," I tell her, "I was bored."

"Who isn't?" she says, tracing our smoke with her eyes.

According to this girl, the brother is a jerk, and his main business on the west coast is escaping his own reputation. She finds it sad that people have come, pretending to care.

"Boredom lies behind most things," I tell her.

"Of course," she agrees. "God, all alone, he wanted someone to talk to."

"Now here we are," I say.

"And to think of all that has had to happen."

I ask her to take a walk with me. We finish our cigarettes, go inside and leave out the front door without saying bye to anyone.

*

It was Craig from work who told me about it. About this wooded area near the creek at the back of the park where, if you leave the path, duck beneath the oak branches and press between the shrubs, you may find two bodies undressed, engaged in the unholy act. Or, if not the lovers themselves, you find evidence, their waste and discarded possessions: hair ties, earrings, used prophylactics and their tin foil packaging, tattered under–things caught like litter in the bushes. The weight of all those meetings hanging in the air has a sweet and rotten and unwholesome stench.

Looking back it's difficult to say why I took her there. Why *her,* do you know what I mean? I guess because she seemed like an

excitable girl. The kind of girl who would be, I shouldn't say *turned on*, but the kind of girl that wouldn't turn up her nose, or have a total conniption. She had on glossy, corvette–red lipstick and a studded leather jacket. Huge black flowing hair that you couldn't believe grew out from such a modest–sized head. I thought maybe the sordid little place in the woods would be right up her alley. I did: I thought it would turn her on.

I know this world has its good people, but mostly it's full of sad sorry sacks. So while I couldn't have known, I should have known.

These days I'd give anything not to talk about it. I try very hard not to, but the fact of it presses into every word until it's the only thing we can talk about.

*

After that night it was kind of natural that we became a couple. After the hospital and telling our story to the police we went back to her place. We fell asleep on the couch as the sun came up and woke up uncomfortably slouched against one another a few hours later. We got coffee together, not saying too much really, but between the words and silences it was just plain evident we couldn't simply go our separate ways.

Of course I was a little suspicious, considering the circumstances. I wondered if we both didn't secretly see our relationship as an obligation.

*

She started seeing someone; a woman psychiatrist. She feels it is helping. Myself, I've observed no real notable change to date. Or if I have, it's that she's become more irritable and upset than ever. Apparently, this doctor tells her it's the sort of thing that's supposed to get worse before it gets better. But for how long does it have to get worse? That's not an inappropriate question, I don't think. Not if I'm helping with the cost.

Roughly twice a week, at her insistence, I call up the police to inquire about our case. I'm made to wait through a long period of holding before I'm told again about the unlikelihood of any sort of development *this late in the game*.

I'm hurting too. Yet I know the best thing I can do is be

supportive. So that's what I'm doing.

*

I enter her apartment and she is cross-legged on the floor with the dismantled parts laid out, referencing a manual titled *Glock "Safe Action" GEN4 Pistols*.

"What's that for," I ask. "Protection?"

"Dr. Warner says it'll help me regain a sense of security." It's the most attention I've seen her devote to a task. "Have you ever held a gun?" she asks, sliding one part into place along another. "It's kind of surreal."

"I've never been interested in them," I tell her.

"It's not like you don't expect it to be heavy," she says, lifting the reassembled weapon. She holds it out, squints down the sight, and drags her aim across the room until she's pointing the thing at me. "But the weight still surprises you."

"Babe –"

"Calm down," she says, "it's not loaded." Metal clicks as she pulls the trigger.

*

I was rough, she says. My natural response was to disarm her. I shouldn't have twisted her wrist, I admit, but I hardly think I overreacted. Because even if you're positive it's unloaded, you don't point and trigger a gun at someone.

*

The first of September. I will always recall the date, I suppose. Without hesitating she follows me; almost seems she knows the way better than I. We pull off our clothes and dropped them in piles. Her skin prickles with goose bumps under my touch. I get beneath her so she won't have to lie on the ground. The sky above is dark and empty, but the city, not a hundred yards away, pollutes enough light to make our flesh visible, like milky forms in twilight.

She slides over me and I forget the discomfort of the twigs and knotted ground pressing into my back. That initial narcotic sensation is like warm food to an empty belly. My mind flattens into a pancake, and I exist only to the edges of my pleasure, dead to the world beyond.

I briefly register the flight of steps rushing towards us, and her

startled cry, before I'm knocked clean out.

*

Lately it would seem she is getting better. We watch a crime drama sitting together on the couch. In the episode, the police are after a man who abducts women and leaves their violated bodies in the woods. I ask if she wants to switch it off. Used to be such content would upset her, but she says it's fine.

It's difficult to know how much the medications lend to these improvements. I think it's a little of all things: time, emotional support, chemical balance. I think most of all she's just ready to move forward.

The only thing to do now *is* move forward.

*

Something happens, as if to prove my point. I receive a phone call from the detective on our case, asking us to view a lineup.

Three suspects march gloomily into the room and stand along the wall. Sullen, pathetic young men.

Right away she makes a positive ID. The detective recommends she take a moment to be certain. He speaks into a microphone telling the suspects to look straight ahead. Their faces are frightened and mask-like under the cold light.

They were picked up for joyriding, the detective explains. They took off in a car left running while the owner was away for some moments. The arresting officer confiscated a pocketknife from one of the boys. The detective presents us with the object in a sealed evidence bag.

It is not the right knife and they are not the right boys, I'm sure. All of it being too small.

*

I come to consciousness naked in darkness with my head ringing and my face pushed into the ground. Someone is on top of me spitting threats into my ear. I try and fight him off, and for my efforts I'm punched in the temple. The pain is an intense white shock behind my eyes. Blood and dirt make gravel in my mouth.

"Try that again," I'm told, "and I'll cut off your prick."

I don't know what is happening, where I am, or even who I am. Spend a life waking up in relative comfort and safety, and you have no

point of reference in such events. Whose life is this? What enemy is on my back? Who, I wonder, is that crying woman?

*

In the viewing room we came to agree that the boys in custody were not the perpetrators of the crime against us. But now she's doubtful. I understand, her hopes were raised and dashed. What I don't understand is how this is my fault.

"How do you know it wasn't them?" she screams at me.

"They were men," I tell her, "grown men."

"You're sure? Or your ego has to believe that?"

"Since when is this about me?" I ask. "I just want to help you."

"Maybe you can't," she says.

*

I wake from a dream and find her not in bed. At the window the snug light of daybreak seeps in. I get up to see about her.

She is at the kitchen table seated with her legs curled up beneath her. She's bent over, writing intently. The sight is nearly serene, except for the gun on the table.

"What are you doing?" I startle her, and the way she looks at me, I'm trespassing.

"Writing something," she says.

"Okay," I say. "And the gun?"

"It's not doing anything. I just like having it."

"But how it looks," I say.

"How it looks?" she repeats. "Like I'm writing a suicide letter?"

"Are you?"

"No," she says. "Can I please just be alone?"

"Not with the gun," I tell her. "Let me put it away."

She lifts it off the table and presses the barrel into her mouth. My heart braces. The trigger clicks and she tosses her head back.

"I've still never loaded it," she says, setting it down. "Do you realize you didn't even try to stop me?"

"That's not fair," I say.

"It's fine if you want out. You can just go. It won't mean you're a bad person."

Every possible response disappears between thought and tongue

into the chasm of silence. Each moment is a missed opportunity to say something, to stop the inevitable.

"I've tried my best," I finally manage. "Considering," I add.

*

In theory, it seems possible to offer a person endless understanding. I can imagine what it looks like: open ears, kind eyes, and a calm breath before you speak. Still, with your ears tuned to that individual, and the kindest pair of eyes set on your face, when it's time to speak, and the right words are not there, even the best intentions in the world will be spoiled by whatever comes to your lips in their place.

RIGOBERTO GONZÁLEZ
CANTO

In the summer of 1984, two years after the death of my mother, my aunt decided to make good on a promise: to ensure that my brother and I completed one of the mandated holy sacraments--our first communion.

At 14, I was considered a late-comer. My brother at 12, also. Usually, children in Mexico took their first communion before the age of 10. There was no proper explanation for why our family had neglected this Catholic duty so my aunt simply walked into the church in Mexicali to seek advice from the priest. The priest, shook his head and looked down at us, two poor orphans, with grave pity and gave my aunt the name of a catechism teacher, a catequista, who would be more than happy to offer us a crash course. "She's a widow, you know," the priest informed us, and I wasn't sure if he meant that not having a husband allotted her the time for such charity or if her widowhood made her more sympathetic to our needs.

That same afternoon we walked over to la catequista's house. She too listened patiently and kept glancing at us as my aunt tried to justify why we had to compress a year-long instruction into one summer: we were visiting from the U.S., this was the only chance we had before we were returned to our non-practicing Catholic grandparents, we were in need of salvation. La catequista didn't react, as if she had seen this situation many times before. About the only thing that surprised her was when my aunt insisted that my brother and I not sit on the couch but on the floor because we were dirty. La catequista was flustered at first, but let it go. It was as if she understood my aunt's awkwardness at stepping into a house that was clearly a rich lady's home. None of us were used to entering such spaces with porcelain knickknacks and doilies so white they settled on the furniture like miraculous snowflakes that would never melt.

I took an immediate liking to la catequista. She was the most beautiful lady I had come across. She was impeccably coiffed, her dress looked freshly-pressed, and she had the most delicate hands I had ever

seen on a woman, my mother included. La catequista's were the hands of a woman who wasn't used to hard labor, who probably had a maid to do the household chores, and I didn't hold any of these things against her because I was smitten. And I wanted her to like me back just as quickly.

As usual, my brother and I were simply passive observers to the decisions of the grown-ups. We left la catequista's house and on the way home my aunt explained to us the summer's drill: three days a week for the next month, we would come here for lessons. The rest of those days we would have to memorize the teachings in the catechism, the Catholic's manual of questions, answers and prayers. The expectation didn't frighten me, though my brother was sure from the get-go that this was going to ruin our summer fun.

"I don't mind," I said to him.

"Of course, you don't," my brother said. "*You're* no fun." He then scampered off to join the rest of the boys in a game of soccer on the street.

Since there was absolutely nothing of an athlete but plenty of nerd in me I took to the tiny catechism book with enthusiasm. Each day I spent hours copying the pages onto a notebook because we had borrowed the catechism from a neighbor. My aunt said she didn't have money to spend on a book we would only use for one month, but the truth was she didn't have any money at all, so I didn't question the odd request to rewrite the entire book so that I could return the catechism to its rightful owner. While I copied I underlined words I didn't know. In the afternoons I stood next to my aunt as she unpinned the clothes from the line and she explained these words I had never heard before. At bedtime, I murmured the prayers to myself, determined to please my beloved catequista.

During this time there was another event unfolding in the background. I caught snippets of information on the neighbor's radio or on the news reports on Mexican TV--the Olympics were taking place in Los Angeles. LA was only a few hours away but it might as well have been another planet since most people we knew could not cross the border. And those who could, like my father or my aunt, had no reason to venture that far north. They never traveled past the agricultural fields

of the Coachella Valley, where they worked most of the year as farm-workers.

The subject of the Olympics did, however, infiltrate the conversation of one of our weekly cook-outs on the back porch. My aunt kept bringing out fresh meat from the fridge and my uncle stood over the grill. Other grown-ups were already digging in while the younger kids ran around and had to be snagged by the shirt collars to force them to eat. The radio was on and the announcer suddenly chimed in to report that Mexico, just like every Olympic year, sucked.

"Well, that was unnecessary," one of the grown-ups said.

"But it's true," my aunt said. "And it's because our government won't give these kids proper training. The United States claims every medal and makes Mexico look like it showed up by accident." She leaned forward to take a bite of her taco in order to avoid spilling grease on her blouse.

"Maybe we should compete in what we excel in," my uncle, her husband, said, in a rare show of courage to speak up. "Like taco eating." He pointed at my aunt with the tongs.

I thought his statement was kind of funny, but the delivery was too slow on the uptake, so it didn't pick up any traction and no one laughed. Also, my aunt just glared at him, chewing her food with an exaggerated movement that served as a warning.

The Olympic games, just like LA, just like la catequista's house, were foreign territories to us. Of course we knew what they were, but none of us took much interest, not even in soccer or boxing, which were sports many of our family members liked to follow on TV. Our history teacher in high school was excited to brag that he knew the man who was choreographing the marching bands for the opening ceremony. My fellow ninth graders were not readily impressed by that and I didn't know how to react to it either. I suppose that at that age we were all simply preoccupied with our individual adolescent worlds.

My particular world was still grief-stricken from the loss of my mother. And the loss of my father, who had decided to remarry and move out of our grandparents' house while my brother and I were in school. Staying with my aunt and my five cousins over the summer was our grandparents' way of giving us some space, though I knew it was

they who wanted their cramped two-bedroom apartment back. Whatever the reason, studying the catechism seemed like a small price to pay in order to spend the summer at my aunt's big house with a large back porch and its expansive view of the boulevard that stretched so far out it shrank the huge cargo trucks down to the size of bugs.

The other reason my brother and I were there, I suspected, was to mend a bridge with our father. I had not forgiven him for leaving us behind with our grandparents. One afternoon I walked into my aunt's house after sitting on the back porch, bored of leafing through the catechism in my notebook, and was surprised to see my father sitting in the living room. The TV was on, and like every other station, the Olympic games were showing--swimming or some other water sport. No one was really watching but it was a habit to keep the TV playing, the white noise necessary to muffle the constant chaos of people walking in and out at all times of the day.

My body froze when I saw him sitting on the couch with a beer in his hand. He smiled and took a sip from the bottle.

"You were outside reading?" he asked.

"Yes," I stuttered.

My two uncles were also seated in the living room so I felt I had invaded some exclusive masculine space. It certainly stopped me from displaying any emotion, like crying because I was so happy to see my father, or yelling because I was so upset he had abandoned me. Instead I kept walking right through the living room and to the kitchen as if that had been my intention all along.

I don't remember if my little brother had a difficult time with my father's presence. Alex seemed more interested in the streets. I couldn't get him to sit still and read the catechism notebook so my aunt forced one of her sons--my brother's sidekick in all things mischief--to simmer down once in a while to study.

My father, always a popular center of attention, wandered about the place, joking and telling stories, which made it more challenging to justify my resentment towards him. Just when I thought I could edge my feelings toward forgiveness something came along to remind me of how much he had failed us. Like the time my aunt sat with me on the porch behind the house to tell me about deodorant.

"Smell this," she directed me, holding up one of my own dirty shirts.

"It smells," I said.

"Those are your armpits," she said. She explained it so gently but it still felt like a type of shaming, as if I should have been spared this embarrassing exchange if only my father had told me about the need for deodorant in the first place.

Puberty was a tougher subject to navigate so my aunt left it up to her husband, that shy man who I rarely heard speak except to reprimand one of his boys for doing this or not doing the other. We had our chat on the bench one afternoon and I knew it was as devastating to him as it was to me.

"You're in a stage of your life when your body changes. And has urges," he said as flatly as if he were giving me directions to the post office.

I stared out at the boulevard and slipped into tune-out mode. My neck was flushed and so was his as he stumbled his way into a less-colorful version of the birds and the bees that my older cousins had been regaling us with those evenings at the clubhouse--a makeshift "boys only" room built on top of my aunt's house. I didn't venture there often, only when my female cousins wanted to have some "girls only" time of their own, in which case I had no choice but to sit and listen to the boys' dirty jokes and idiotic stories with implausible erotic plot lines that always seemed to end with a scene involving a naked priest or a horny nun. And when they arrived at the masturbation testimonials I shook my head and said, "That's wrong."

All heads turned to me. "What?" one of my cousins said.

"It's wrong to touch yourself," I said. "God is watching."

A few of them stifled a laugh. My oldest cousin, the ringleader, decided to take over. "And you've never touched yourself?"

"No," I said in earnest. "It would offend God."

A quiet descended upon the group, which I now know was more like pity. I would have become the object of relentless ridicule if my cousin, in an unusual display of mercy, hadn't intervened. "That's alright," he told the group. "He's an innocent. Stupidly so, but there's no reason to hold that against him."

The group proceeded with their vulgarities, pretending I wasn't in the room.

If I could have excused my poor uncle from this uncomfortable duty I would have. But I respected his effort so I let him go on a little longer, telling me about men and women and this mysterious physical thing that happened, which could result in an unwanted pregnancy and then what a fine mess we would all be in.

My catechism was a little more all-inclusive in exploring that territory. One of the questions simply asked: *What are the three enemies of the soul?* The answer: *The devil, the world, and the flesh.* My aunt extrapolated. They were enemies because they were temptations: the devil tempted me into wrongdoings, into crimes again God; the world tempted me with the love of money, of material things, the trappings of power and position and wealth; the flesh--and I was surprised my aunt spat this one out so easily--meant the temptation of sex with those women of ill repute.

It was an odd answer but I understood that in some strange way she was actually talking about my stepmother. I suspected this because anytime the subject came up she was quick to criticize the fact that my stepmother wore make-up, that she bought those expensive bras with girdles attached, that she dyed her hair blonde. My stepmother was a list of offenses against feminine decency, perhaps even obscene. It made me feel sorry for her until I remembered that I faulted her too for taking my father away from me.

After the whole enemies of man explanation, I asked my aunt, quite innocently, "So what are the enemies of women?"

She answered without skipping a beat. "Just one: man."

At this point in the rambling narrative of my poor uncle's beleaguered sex education course, he was approaching the subject of masturbation, which made his mouth so dry he started to cough. I thought it would be wise to let him off the hook.

"Thank you, uncle," I said. "I know all that already."

He looked at me with relief. "Oh, well that's good," he said. "Though I hope you're not getting all of your information from the boys at the clubhouse."

"It's all in here," I said, and I lifted my catechism notebook to show him.

"Good," he said. He rose from the bench and looked out at the boulevard. "Looks like rain this afternoon. Let me go roll the windows up in the truck." And with that, he left and I wondered what strange method he was using to predict the weather since there was nothing beyond the boulevard but clear sky.

Instruction day. I rose early, showered and pressed into my armpits a few extra layers of deodorant so that I could sit on la catequista's couch, though by the time we reached her house we were drenched in sweat. My brother would only come along if his sidekick, our cousin, was there to keep him company, which everyone agreed to just to because nothing else seemed to motivate him.

"My, look at you all, it's so hot, why didn't you take the bus?" la catequista asked.

"We can't afford the bus fare," my cousin answered, which seemed to distraught la catequista. I made a note to tell my aunt that he had done this.

We drank our glasses of water and prepared for the lessons but first la catequista had to chase her son out of the room. He was seated in front of the TV watching the Olympics.

"Raymundo, my love," la catequista said, sweetly. "Can you please watch the TV in the back room?"

"Yes, mamita," Raymundo said. He turned the TV off and came over to give la catequista a kiss on the cheek before exiting the living room.

The heat I felt was coming from my brother and my cousin, who I was certain were going to mock this public display of affection all the way home. "*Yes, mamita,* how old is this fucking faggot?" one of them would say to other, while I lagged behind.

As for me, I felt a bit jealous. This Raymundo didn't look very smart. He was dressed in better clothes but that was because his mother dressed him. And maybe my mind was playing tricks on me but I could have sworn he smelled, that rank armpit smell that was no longer a part

of who I was. I discreetly sniffed myself just in case. No, I swore on my catechism notebook that it was Raymundo.

It didn't matter that my brother and my cousin threw dagger-eyes at me each time I got the questions right or when I recited a prayer so flawlessly it brought great joy to la catequista--I was doing this for *her,* not for them or even for me. I was dazzling her with my memorization skills because she had become so special to me. I adored the way her eyes sparkled when I made it all the way through the Apostles' Creed, the way she clasped her hands to her chest and said "Amén," and the way that word floated out of her pretty lips, a blessing that hovered over me like a guardian angel. Tearing myself apart from la catequista after the hour's lesson was such a disappointment for me. And such a delight for my brother. We left and, predictably, my cousin and brother couldn't stop bad-mouthing Raymundo. And for once, their stupid remarks made me smile.

When we arrived at the neighborhood, there was a flurry of activity on the street. Don Pepe had just parked his candy cart in front of my aunt's house and the kids buzzed around it like bees. My cousin ran inside to ask his mother for money, but my brother stayed behind. Suddenly he turned to me for sympathy because I was the only other person who understood at that moment that we had no one to direct our pleas for money.

I was about to offer some words of comfort when my cousin ran out of the house yelling, "Hey, Alex, your father's here!"

That changed everything for Alex, who ran into the house. Perhaps it was the contagious excitement, or the many tempting items dangling from Don Pepe's candy cart that made me set all modesty aside and also run into the house. I crossed paths with my brother who was already on his way out. But as soon as I saw my father, I changed my mind.

"You need some money too, son?" he asked.

Something boiled inside of me. *Son?* He had called me his son. But when my brother walked in waving his candy in my face, my anger subsided.

"Well, maybe I want one of those," I said, pointing at the sweet and spicy wheels that unroll into foot-long strings of tamarind pulp.

My father walked out to the candy cart and I hated myself for letting my sweet tooth betray me. I didn't like this age where I could be bribed and bought with candy. When my father walked back in, he held out an entire pack with six wheels linked together. I was not sure what kind of response he expected but what I gave him made his face darken.

"What are you doing?" I yelled. "I just wanted one! Why are you embarrassing me like this? Why are you showing off to everyone when you're not even my father anymore? Why don't you just go away and leave me alone!"

I left him standing in the middle of the living room with the candy and I ran out of the house to hide out on my bench. A few minutes later, my aunt came out to sit beside me.

"That wasn't very kind," she said. "You hurt your father's feelings."

I started crying.

"You're old enough to understand that he has to live his own life," she said. "Your mother passed away and he needs a woman. And believe me you don't want a woman of ill repute to be your mother. So it's better this way. You have your grandmother to take care of you. And you have me and your other aunts, although, don't put too much faith on *them* since they're only related by marriage."

I was still crying but I also wanted to laugh at the ridiculous logic of grown-ups and their flexible values. They behaved in complete contradiction to the teachings of the catechism that laid things out clearly and openly: this was right, that was wrong, you did this, you didn't do that. Maybe I wasn't the one who needed the crash-course. And that's when the idea finally took root in my mind. It had been planted there from the beginning but I wasn't nurturing it the way I really wanted to. The answer was indeed la catequista. "She's a widow, you know," the priest had told us. Which meant she had to be lonely and lonelier still if all she had was that stinky armpits Raymundo to keep her company. I resolved then and there to ask la catequista to adopt me.

"I'm okay now," I said to my aunt, who seemed surprised the crying just stopped. I got up and walked into the house to accept those

candy wheels from my father because this was the last time I was going to see him.

My heart fluttered with anticipation all night that it was difficult to fall asleep. I recited my prayers, my memorized questions and answers, spinning them in my brain until I was dizzy and eventually drowsy. The next morning I woke myself up singing. Nothing to be embarrassed about except that I didn't sleep alone. Since there wasn't much space to go around we slept five to a room. My spot was on the floor, between two other bodies.

"Someone's happy," my cousin said.

"Did I wake you?" I asked.

"You woke us all up," my brother said from the top bunk bed.

"What did it sound like?" I asked.

"I don't know. It sounded like a church song."

Un canto--the confirmation I needed that I was doing the right thing today.

"What were you dreaming about?" my cousin asked.

I wasn't sure what I was dreaming about but when I didn't answer no one cared enough to pursue it and everyone went back to sleep. I got up, folded my blanket, for the last time, I was sure of it, and put together a backpack with a small bundle of things I didn't want to leave behind--my favorite shirt, extra underwear, a picture of my mother I carried with me when I traveled, a rosary I took from my grandmother's room because it reminded me of the novena we prayed after my mother's burial.

That afternoon I couldn't get to la catequista's house soon enough. I had it all planned out. As soon as lessons were done, I'd let my brother and cousin walk out ahead of me and I'd stay behind to make my proposition.

But during our lesson I was distracted daydreaming about how I was going to be having breakfast at the table every morning, about what my new bedroom was going to be like. I stared at a picture of la catequita's dead husband on the lamp table as if I wanted some telepathic communication and get some words of advice about what to do to make his widow happy. I was looking around the room so often that

la catequista paused at one point to ask me if I was alright. This startled me. My brother and cousin glanced at each other, storing the mishap for later use.

"Let's continue," la catequista said. "Alexandro, name the seven capital sins. Rigoberto, name the seven virtues."

The slight annoyance in her voice unsettled me. I was setting the wrong tone for the occasion. My brother dragged the list out of his memory banks with his cheerleader at his side. But when my turn came the seven virtues completely flew out of my head. I stared blankly at la catequista.

"Rigoberto, I'm surprised at you today," she said. My brother mocked me by shaking his head in disapproval. I found it difficult to swallow.

As we finished the lesson, Raymundo couldn't wait to turn the TV on to watch the Olympics. My cousin asked for a soda and la catequista directed him to the fridge and my brother joined him in the caper. La catequista just breathed in deeply as if she had no choice but to accept the ways of the adolescent boys around her.

"Señora," I managed to say. Though I wasn't sure what was going to come next. Should I apologize for being such a terrible student or should I go ahead and tell her that I wanted her to adopt me, to take me away from that family that only knew how to love me with candy and cook-outs and naughty stories that made me feel disrespectful toward God?

"What is it, Rigoberto? Do you have something to tell me?"

"I--" the words felt heavy in my mouth. *Say it, say it, say it, you idiot!* a voice inside me demanded. But that lingering doubt that I had ignored before, now began to make my entire body tremble. Yet I had to know. I really had to know whether she would take to the idea of adopting me or laugh me right out of her home. But when I finally said it, it came out in a whisper, a sound too faint for her to hear.

La catequista came closer. "What did you say? I didn't hear you. Raymundo, my love, please turn the television down!"

But Raymundo of the stinky armpits didn't turn the television down. Instead he yelled back: "Mami, mami, look, look, we're going to win a gold medal! We're going to win a gold medal!"

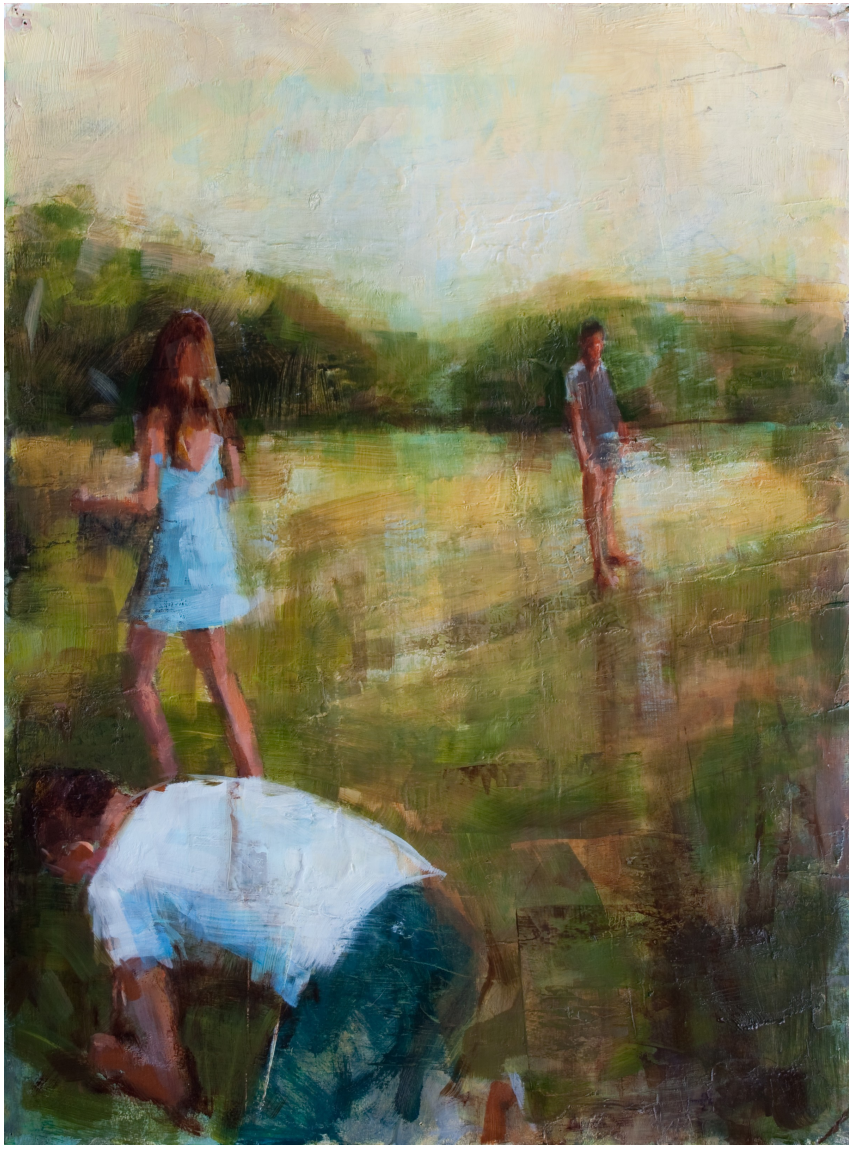
Everyone turned to the TV. And sure enough, there was excitement in the announcer's voice because Ernesto Canto was most certainly going to place in the men's 20 km speed-walk.

"Canto, Canto, Canto," the TV announcer began to chant. My brother and cousin closed in on the TV set with Raymundo who was already chanting along with the TV, "Canto, Canto, Canto."

"Too exciting!" la catequista said, and she placed her delicate hand on my shoulder to hold herself still because she was shaking. And as Ernesto Canto reached the finish line, a joy overcame la catequista. She beamed and I could feel that warmth press against me when she threw her arms around me in exhilaration. I breathed in her perfume and smiled. Oh my God, this was my heaven.

"México, México, México," the announcer changed his chant, and so did the boys in the living room.

I didn't know what was going to consume me first, the fact the poor little Mexico was going to win its Gold medal, or that I finally got what I had been waiting for--an affectionate touch from someone in the room who thought that it mattered that I too was in the room. It was a small thing, that hug, but in that moment, it was a giant triumph, like that God medal, worth clinging to because deep down inside we all knew there would be very few others to come.



SARA PEDIGO | *field notes*

LIZ ROBBINS

field notes

the girl in the sky–blue sundress with one strap
down watches as the tall man watches her––

in the background a brass instrument commands,
it's the fourth of july, and in the periphery of watching

someone is forever bent over, and much further back
scores of dolls with blank faces, scores of unspeakable

plots . . . must we succumb to being children of such
disinheritance, love already escaping among the dried

wildflowers, legacy insisting the love song terrible even
for the most faithful, one leaving eventually, the night

sky, the parched earth . . . see, someone has set out
Chinese lanterns at dusk to charm the lawn, to guide

the watching, someone has set out drinks––

SARA PEDIGO | *The Boat's Floor*

LIZ ROBBINS

ARS POETICA FOR A BLOCKED STUDENT

Dry-heartedness is not
the issue. Not only is
the heart there and large but
wet. It weeps eternal for a
nonexistent judgment day.
Movement, scooping pails
of saltwater from the boat's floor,
helps. So does carving
your name in oars. Such things
take time, we were not meant to
burn but circle. Under the trees,
the green-wrecked trees--
branches and leaves dripping
a storm's water--run tunnels
to the warm, dark margins.
Where if you wait, the gold
eyes of foxes open.

GRID FOR MORE OR LESS, in 6x9 book 5x8 pitch, 40 squares, got 4.5x paper,

A B C D

THIS IS NATURE MAN-MADE 1
MORE HUMANLY HOSPITABLE 2
THAN TREES, GRASS, SHRUBBERY 3

4 5 6 7 8 9 10

LOWER EAST-SIDE TENEMENTS 11
A SEA SIX STORIES DEEP. 12
THE GOLD-DOMED MUNICIPAL 13
BUILDING LOOKING SMALL BELOW. 14
HERE I'VE WALKED, AMONG AND BETWEEN 15
SOME DETAILS FAMILIAR, OTHERS NEW. 16

PAUL PEKIN

MONEY

The shots that killed John Fitzgerald Kennedy were fired at 12:30 pm Eastern Standard Time, November 22, 1963. Had no shots been fired, had no history been made, I could still tell you where I was at that moment, that hour, that day. There was only one place I could have been--in my store, behind the counter ringing up a ten cent sale, most likely a newspaper, most likely the Dziennik Zwiazkowy, most likely to an old man who brought his dime out of an embroidered coin purse carried with him from Europe.

Who brought the news through the door? Could have been a driver. Hostess Cupcake delivered about that hour. So did Butternut bread. Could have been a customer, the Pall Mall lady came in about then, two packs a day, she had to have them.

What is it with the Kennedys? I was asked that recently, as if I haven't asked it of myself. In 1963 no one asked. There was only one Kennedy and he was dead. Less than six months later his face was on a coin.

A beautiful coin. I would describe it but I'm sure you've already seen one. Those 1964 JFKs, I actually gave them out in change. Customers who normally refused to take half dollar coins would smile when they saw JFK. That coin was going to a place where it would never see the bright light of commerce again.

My father often said, glumly, that no Catholic could ever be president of the United States. He and my mother took the secrecy of the voting booth seriously; they would never tell me how they voted, but it wasn't all that difficult to guess. Al Smith had been denied the presidency because "They wouldn't allow it." Roosevelt was a magician because "he made the elephant disappear." The Socialist Party was dead because "Roosevelt stole all their ideas." Socialist was not a bad word for my father; his own deaf mute father had voted for Eugene Debs. There was even a Communist in the family, but only by marriage.

John Kennedy came too late for my father who, in his sixties, stiff, cadaverous and declining fast, always odd, often vacant, had long lost

even the ability to fight with my mother. What did he make of his only son's store? The single aisle, the concrete floor, the second hand showcases, the milk cooler, the magazine rack, the ice cream freezer? The back room, piled up with empty pop bottles and magazines waiting to be returned, the rusty sink, the coal burning stove, the darkened walls, the metal door, the barred windows? He saw it once. He made no comment.

12 hours a day, seven days a week, 364 days a year, customers who argued over sales tax, stood at the magazine rack for hours, camped out on the public phones, and insisted I entertain them when they had nothing better to do. Neighborhood kids who gathered up every empty pop bottle they could find, piled them on my concrete floor, and spent their pennies on candy, one piece at a time. For the first time in my life I had financial stability, but what a tough way to earn it. My cash drawer would be heavy with coins I had to sort and roll before I could call it a day, and still people brought in more. "Here, I know you need these," they would say with malicious smiles, emptying their penny jars on my counter.

If I got out of this, I should have said, I would never, ever go into business again.

My father, being who he was, had tried it twice. First a filling station, no more than a hut with a single Phillips 66 gasoline pump. During the Great Depression? Located in the center of an alley? In fairness, I should point out that the alley connected to an empty lot and thus was not altogether invisible to traffic. The filling station was out of our lives so rapidly I have only one clear memory of it – sitting in that little hut reading an Argosy Magazine. There was a story in one issue about a man who enraged a witch doctor, and suddenly found himself changed into a dog, then a rat, then a mouse, and so on until he wound up as a fish, and was eaten by a larger fish.

Later there was a pool hall, and a ferocious fist fight I fought on his behalf, and, unrelated, a St. Bernard guard dog that sent him to the hospital. But what I have to do, rather than talk about these things, is get back to where I started. A silver half dollar.

Those who dream and butt their heads against normalcy very often find their ways to the gambling table. There was a tavern back in depression–era Blue Island whose owners and their descendants went on to be respectable citizens so we won't talk about them. But it was a bit of a gamblers' hangout. A bookie operated upstairs, and a card table seemed to be going at all hours in the barroom. My father had that gambler's mentality. A game of poker, he believed, was more than a matter of luck. With skill and cunning and a few good cards, a clever man could do well, and maybe improve his lot in life.

Naturally, the sharks devoured him alive. My mother heard stories of how he would tear up his cards in a rage, and even bite them into pieces. Meanwhile, a family that already had little to eat had less. The fights over gambling set the tone for the rest of their lives together. Money became more important than life itself.

I saw my first fifty cent piece about then. One evening my mother sent me across the street to get my father. Women did that in those days, sent children to get dad out of the tavern. You must have heard of the song, "Father Dear Father/Come Home With Me Now." Of course my father was not drinking. That was not his vice. He was at the table.

I entered the dark smoky bar from its door on Western Avenue. There were so many bars on Western in those days, you could walk down the street and smell the beer. When my eyes adjusted I looked around and saw a group of men at a large round table, among them my father in his gray fedora hat. Cards were being dealt. I advanced, but could not speak. One of the men threw a coin into the pot. My father's turn was next. He stared at his cards, frowning, and finally reached into his pocket to extract a single half dollar coin, as large and bright as the moon itself, enough to buy supper today, tomorrow, and the next day for all I knew. He hesitated, yes, but then he threw it into the pot.

All that remains is the sight of that half dollar. I can never think of Kennedy, and not think of it, a silver half dollar, large and bright as the moon, and even more distant.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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Rachel Squires Bloom: I have had poems in *The Hawaii Review*, *Poet Lore, Fugue, Poetry East, Main Street Rag, Kimera, Nomad's Choir, The Mad Poet's Review, Bluster, 96 Inc., Bellowing Ark, Slugfest, Thin Air, Taproot Literary Review, True Romance, Lucid Stone, Green Hills Literary Lantern, California Quarterly, Chest,*and *A View from the Bed.* But that's not what matters. What matters is that I wrote my first poem at age six on a paper plate, struck at the insight that the two-syllable "flower" rhymed with "power," edging me beyond cat-bat-hat. I rarely write about flowers now, although they occasionally appear as imagery, along with soup kitchens, *pillbugs, passports, crickets, and the bones of Capuchin monks.*

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